

# FAMINES IN BENGAL

1770 — 1943

KALI CHARAN GHOSH

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## FOREWORD

Polonius, much given to advising, offered the following maxim to his son Laertes :

“Give everyman thy ear, but few thy voice,  
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgement.”

Whether Kali Charan Ghosh has ever received such an advice, I do not know, but there is ample evidence that he has not acted on that cautious precept. And the world is much richer as a consequence, since there has been so much to learn from Kali Charan Ghosh’s examination and assessment of developments in modern Indian history. His voice has been loud and clear, and his judgement far reaching.

In addition to illuminating the nature of the catastrophe that was the Bengal Famine of 1943, this book provides a reasoned assessment and a powerful indictment of the failure of the government to take appropriate action. That failure cost millions of lives, and Kali Charan Ghosh was not going to muffle his ‘voice’, or reserve his ‘judgement’. He wrote many stirring essays on the subject during the famine, and gathered these essays together and some other material in the form of this book first published in 1944, when the fires of the famine were still flickering. His essays were widely read, and often quoted, and the book has been rightly treated as a classic.

The book puts together a good deal of pertinent information about the famine, along with analysis, questioning and assessment. Even today, for anyone studying the Bengal famine, this book remains the most engaging starting point. It is, of course, a passionate book, not meant as a cool and neutral account of events. It gave expression to the appalling sense of tragedy in watching the events and the powerful rage that moved observers as they saw the total inadequacy of the

policies pursued by the Government. A lot of detailed information has become available since Kali Charan Ghosh's book first appeared, perhaps the most important being the results of the 1944 survey carried out by Prasanta Mahalanobis and his associates, which have been recently analysed more fully. But the central relevance of Kali Charan Ghosh's analysis remains unaffected by this more detailed understanding of what happened and why. Kali Charan Ghosh was right both in focussing on some of the more distressing aspects of the famine and in pinning responsibility where it belonged. It must also be added that this book is not merely an *account* of history ; it is a *part* of it. No reporting of the Bengal famine can be complete without taking note of the powerful and influential assessment of the famine published by Kali Charan Ghosh in various essays during the famine, gathered together in this volume.

When Kali Charan Ghosh asked me to write a Foreword for the new edition of this famous treatise, I felt quite inadequate to the task. I still do. But much has been written on famines in general and the Bengal famine in particular since the book first appeared, and it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that this work still remains a lasting contribution to the understanding of the Bengal Famine, covering its characteristics, causation, perception and response. We must be grateful to the publishers for making the book widely available once again. As a part of the history of that period, it has to be read *both* for what it says and for what it is.

AMARTYA SEN



## PREFACE

Conscious as I am of my own shortcomings I had never had any intention of writing a *book* on Famines in Bengal. Stray articles written for newspapers and periodicals and kept in a file assumed a moderate size in the course of a few months. At first I thought of printing the articles in one volume and presenting it to the public as a record of the famine and the causes that, in my opinion, led to the disaster. But on a careful perusal it was found necessary, before publication, to revise them with a view to avoiding repetition of ideas and facts which had become almost inevitable, written as the articles were on different occasions and for different journals and newspapers. It was an extremely difficult task as most of these articles had to be rewritten and given a new shape. Some notes, which had not been written previously, had to be inserted hurriedly to deal with the subject, particularly the Famine of 1943, in all its aspects. The result is the present volume, *Famines in Bengal 1770—1943*.

I have tried to present a background of the present famine by a study of records of the past famines in Bengal. I have spared no pains to get at the original reports that have been long forgotten or are lying under a thick layer of dust in the official archives. I am sure a careful perusal of the main chapter, 'Bengal Famines' will show that all the sins of omission and commission discernible in tackling famines that involved great loss of life in the past, were repeated in every detail, while the measures that were able to avert great calamities, such as those of 1873-74, were either overlooked or completely ignored. It is a great pity that the valuable recommendations based on experience and contained in the records now in the possession of the Central and the Provincial Governments were not carefully studied nor acted upon in time.

I am indebted to my friends who have helped me in various ways in bringing out this book. I am grateful to the Editors of the *Forward*, and the *Hindusthan Standard* and particularly to Shri Kedar Nath Charterji, Editor, *The Modern Review*, who published my articles month after month at considerable sacrifice of the interests of the Journal in these days of 'quotas' 'and controls' of paper. His courage is all the more commendable in view of the fact that he took the almost certain risk of incurring the displeasure of the authorities. My friend, S. J. Sailendra Krishna Laha, M. A., also of *The Modern Review* deserves thanks for encouraging me in writing the series for the Journal and exhorting me to go on till I had finished.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my esteemed friend, Shri Raj Kumar Bose, Attorney-at-Law, who by his sincere love and affection for me has commanded my sincere respect and has come to be looked upon as an elder brother, for going through the manuscript and effecting valuable changes in the book.

As the book could not be published before April 1944, a chapter dealing with the conditions prevailing in the country in the early part of the year has been added to make the record up-to-date.

6 Raja Basanta Ray Road,  
Kalighat P. O.,  
Calcutta, the 1st May, 1944.

*Author.*

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

We feel extremely happy in being able to publish this pioneering work by the Late Kalicharan Ghosh. But it has not been altogether free from a feeling of sadness either, because we could not publish it during the author's lifetime. We crave our esteemed readers, indulgence for this unwitting delay.

In this connection, we need thank Sri Jivantara Halder & Sri Nisithranjan Ray who introduced the Late Kalicharan Ghosh with us, of which the present publication is a fruit.



**Most sorrowfully  
DEDICATED  
to the memory of  
India's countless millions  
who  
during the last days of their existence  
suffered the most agonising torture  
of a tardy death  
not in the pursuit of a high ideal  
not in any noble cause  
not for any fault of their own  
except that  
they were born and lived  
under a peculiar  
political social and economic system.**

**AUTHOR**

*"Nearly 200 millions<sup>1</sup> of people living a life of chronic starvation and of the most abject ignorance, grim and silent in their suffering, without zest in life, without comfort and enjoyment, without hope or ambition, living because they were born into the world, and dying because life could no longer be kept in the body."*—G. Subramania Iyer.

*"It is a high tragedy that in a country like ours with its abundance of food-stuffs, an extensive system of railways and vast resources of Government both Central and Provincial, there should be deaths due to starvation."*—Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Benares, August 30, 1943.

1770

*"Millions of famished wretches died in the struggle to live through the few intervening weeks that separated them from the harvest, their last gaze being fixed on the densely covered fields that would ripen only a little too late for them."*—Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*.

1943

*"A grim but not entirely uncommon spectacle in East Bengal to-day is to find a whitened skeleton in the corner of a field bearing the richest rice crop in half a century."*—Times of India Special Correspondent, November 16, 1943.

1 The present population is nearly 400 millions.—*Author*.

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**FAMINES IN BENGAL**  
**1770—1943**





**Perplexed and Distressed.**

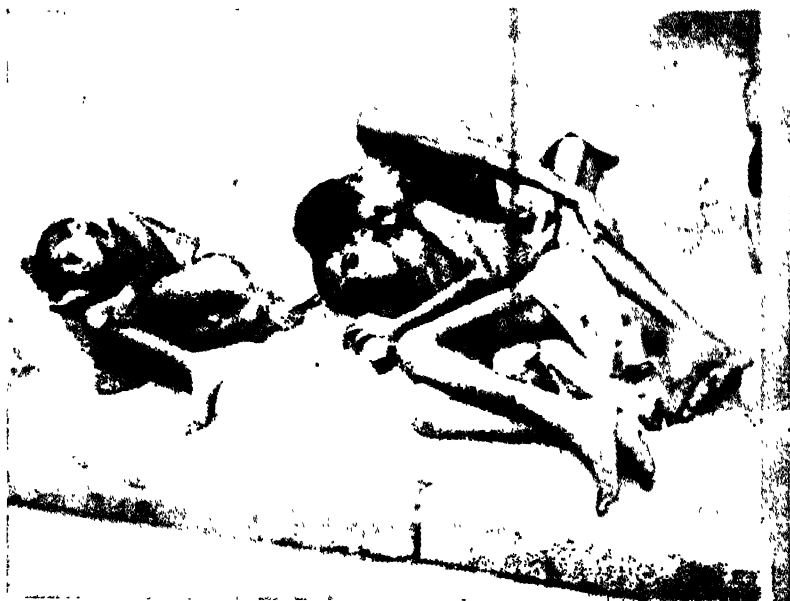
[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



"Nothing for me, Mother dear?"

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]

"HAVING THE HEAD SUBMISSIVELY.



"They lie in bewilderment why the mother has left them sneezing and coughing, purging and vomiting....." P. 77.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



**What pangs he must have suffered : What poor  
consolation he leaves for the mother !**

**[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]**



A human flower blasted by the hot breath of Famine.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



"Our mothers and sisters appear  
to-day in tattered clothes"  
..... P. 122.

[Courtesy *The Statesman*,  
Calcutta]



.... NEVER TO RAISE THEM AGAIN." P. 150

[Courtesy *The Hindustan Standard*]





His last draught.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



“They ransacked the dustbins for a morsel of food.” P. 175.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]

“DIRE SCENES OF HORROR.” Pp. 85-95.



part of the body devoured by wild animals.

(Photo by the Manikganj Sree Sree Ramkrishna Mahila Sakti Sangha)

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



ON THE STREETS AND CITY PAVEMENTS.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



"Rickety babies with dried up limbs and old wrinkled faces.. ..." P. 77.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



“With the first approach of scarcity she sacrificed  
herself bit by bit ...” p. 74.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



'Dead bodies were kept in stacks ....." P. 122.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



"Some are taken to the outskirts of the village  
and left there....." P. 85.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



Rank despair on face and a dead child on lap she  
waits for what she does not know

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]

## SCENES NEAR DUSTBINS



Man and beasts in search of food from the street garbage.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]





"Where are the parents

' P. 77.

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]



**"Women and children suffering uncomplainingly the agonies of starvation." P. 150.**

**[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]**



“But invariably there is a point- when not even the tenderest care  
and most scientific nusing can restore.....” P. 113.  
[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]



"Mere skeleton covered simply with skins." P. 76.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]

FOR AN UNCERTAIN SEER OF RICE



Guarding the "post" during the night on city pavements. P. 115.

[Courtesy *The Statesmen*, Calcutta]

"FAMINE IS OF ALL SCOURGES CRUELLEST TO CHILDREN." P. 76.



"O, Baba ! Baba amar !" ("Darling ! O, my Darling !")

[Courtesy *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*]

## THE JOURNEY'S END



SCENES AT CALCUTTA BURNING GHATS.







Even in sleep “she is pathetically clutching to an earthen pot,  
her sole belonging.” P. 178.

[Courtesy *The Hindusthan Standard*]

In the endless queue in the morning.

[Courtesy *The Hindustan Standard*]



FOR AN UNCERTAIN SEER OF RICE

# FAMINES IN BENGAL

## 1770—1943

### FAMINE RELIEF MEASURES DURING THE MOGHUL PERIOD

FROM the time the administration of the country was taken up by the East India Company we have records of the several famines that visited India at different periods of their rule and also of the details of the measures adopted for alleviation of the distress of the people. It may be highly interesting and profitable to study them by comparison with those undertaken in the Badshahi Amal—the regime of the Moghul Emperors. There was a great personal touch in such affairs which is quite absent with the British Rulers, residing six thousand miles away from the places of occurrence.

For the reign of Emperor Shahjehan (Famine in the Bombay Presidency in 1629-30) the following eloquent testimony is on record :

For two successive years the rains failed and the mortality and depopulation caused thereby were very great. The Emperor Shah Jehan was then at Burhanpur... He ordered poor houses to be opened at Burhanpur, Surat and Ahmedabad for the relief of the famished, and food and money distributed. All taxes were remitted for two years.

Next we come to the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (Report of past famine in the N.-W. Provinces by Girdlestone, Allahabad, 1868) and the famine of 1661

Aurangzeb personally superintended the relief of his subjects, one of his plans being to bring grain on a large scale from Bengal and the Punjab... Several things tend to prove that the calamity was severe. The Emperor opened his treasury and granted money without stint.

He gave every encouragement to the importation of corn and either sold it at reduced prices or distributed it gratuitously amongst those who were too poor to pay. He also promptly acknowledged the necessity of remitting the rents of his cultivators and relieved them for the time being from the burden of other taxes. The vernacular chronicles of the period attribute the salvation of millions of lives, and the preservation of many provinces, to his strenuous exertions.

He (Alamgir) was ably seconded by at least one of the great Hindu chiefs of the time, the Maharana of Udaipur. (Col. Brooke's Report : Famine in 1868-69) :

The first famine in Rajputana, the account of which, in consequence of its intensity, has been handed down to us in writing, and not by tradition, occurred in (Sambat 1717) A.D. 1661. The memorial of it is preserved in the beautiful marble bund<sup>1</sup> erected at Kankrowli in Meywar at an expense of a million sterling by the Maha Rana Raj Singh of Oodeypore to save his people during the dire calamity. The fairy-like structure of the rich ornamented marble was thrown across the course of a stream which forces its way through a range of hills. The famine-stricken were employed in raising a long earthen bund, about three miles in length, to retain the water which would otherwise have escaped in that direction. A noble work with nobler object and of more beautiful execution was never conceived by human intellect. The record is inscribed on a tablet let into the face of the bund itself, and the description carved in it may serve for the fearful time which Rajputana has just passed through.

1 Mr. Brooke's Note : It may be interesting and useful to bring together here some notices I have been able to find of relief works being started by native governments, in order to give employment to famine-stricken people. Major Powlett writes (p. 10 of his reply from Kotah) : "A former Raja of Bikanir was spoken of who employed people during a famine in building a fort and kept the work going at night as well as by day, to enable respectable people to come and earn grain without shame. I notice that Dr. Moore speaks of its being a rare thing in old times for Durbars to set relief works going, as he has heard of but one old work attributed to famine relief. I do not think this is quite correct ; for in Ulwar I can call to mind several such old works. In Kotah, too, there are instances and probably an intimate knowledge of any State would reveal similar works."

## FAMINES IN BENGAL : A STUDY

DURING the British Rule, India has had 22 'Famines' excluding severe 'Scarcities'. Famine was not declared by the Government in 1943 though the conditions were more severe than in most of the previous famines in India. Out of these 23, Bengal suffered in seven either alone or along with some other province or provinces in 1770, 1783, 1866, 1873-74, 1892, 1897 and in 1943.

The rules contained in Chapter III of the Bengal Famine Code

refer primarily to the preliminary stage of a large famine, but they should also be followed in dealing with prolonged distress.

Section 55 of the Code says that

when all preparations (for meeting a famine or prolonged distress) have been made,

the District Officer should wait upon events and devote himself to careful observation. If he finds that prices continue to rise the following indications should carefully be watched for :

- (1) The contraction of private charity indicated by the wandering<sup>1</sup> of paupers ;
- (2) Contraction of credit ;
- (3) Feverish activity in the grain trade ;
- (4) Restlessness shown in an increase of crime ;
- (5) Unusual movements of flocks and herds in search of pasturage ;
- (6) Unusual wandering of people ;
- (7) Increased activity in emigration.

1 Do you look upon "wandering" as a symptom of danger ? Do you know whether it is possible to prevent it ; if so, how ?" asked Mr. J. Caird, Famine Commissioner, 1878-79, and in reply Sir Richard Temple, the then Governor of Bombay, said : "Yes, certainly ; perhaps the most imminent symptom of danger that can possibly appear in times of famine. It is always followed by mischief more or less grave ; it is often the precursor of mortality ; probably more mortality happens in this way than in any other... With all classes (excepting sadhus, habitual wanderers, etc.) the best prevention of wandering is the timely preparation of a framework of village relief... If the prevention be early, prompt and efficient, the wandering will be stopped."

The people of Bengal, in every part of the province, knew from experience that these signs were noticeable everywhere.

In dealing with the history of past famines in Bengal one can see a uniformity in the method of tackling the problem adopted by the authorities at periods separated by decades and centuries. Without much comment I shall proceed with each famine in Bengal leaving the readers to find for themselves the similarity that exists in these relief measures between one another.

The Famine Commissioners<sup>1</sup> wrote about the famine of 1770 :

In October 1769, very gloomy reports were received from Behar and North Bengal. In November the Collector-General 'saw an alarming prospect of the province becoming desolate' and the Government wrote home (November 23) to the Court of Directors in the most alarming terms. They resolved to lay up a six months' store of grain for their troops and sent in December to Dacca and Backergunj to buy rice for Behar... In 1770 the distress was acutest in Behar ; efforts were made, not very successfully, to obtain grain from the British Officers at Allahabad and Fyzabad ; but it is probable that private trade was active.

We know from Mr. Hunter's report that

the whole administration was accused of dealing in grain for their private advantage.<sup>2</sup> It was in vain that the Court of Directors wrote one indignant letter after another demanding the names of the culprits. The 'Court' also

---

1 The Commission was appointed by a resolution of the Government of India, dated the 16th May, 1878. The Commission comprised Major General Strachey, H. S. Cunningham, J. Caird, G. A. Ballard, G. M. Batten, J. B. Peile, Rangacharlu, Mahadev Wasudev Barve, and C. A. Elliott, Secretary.

2 "Between 1769 and 1770 the English manufactured a famine by buying up all the rice and refusing to sell it again except at a fabulous price." Karl Marx : *Capital*, p. 777 (Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd., 1906).

The following is quoted from the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 9, 1943 : Mr. Beveridge, the historian, remarks : 'Before the famine reached its height, almost all the rice in the country was bought up by the servants of the Company.' Not only rice, Mr. Beveridge might have added, but also all the seeds. "The Gomosthas of English gentlemen, not only monopolised grain, but compelled the poor ryots to sell even the seeds requisite for the next harvest." (Auber's *British Power*).

deplored "the corruption and rapacity of our servants" during famine.

The Famine Commissioners' Report further goes on :

In Central and Southern Bengal the period of greatest intensity was from June to September...For several days there was not a grain to be purchased.

The measures adopted by the Government to

relieve distress seem, compared with modern ideas, to have been very insufficient.

As on many other occasions

they issued a proclamation against hoarding and buying up grain,

with what result we do not know. But if we are allowed to judge by the effects of the famine, we must say that the proclamation was treated very lightly by those for whom it was meant. With regard to effects of the famine, the Report says :

The loss to the country in material wealth cannot be calculated ; the loss of life is believed to have been greater than has occurred in any subsequent or historical famine. In the north of Purneah the European supervisors believed that half the ryots were dead ; the Resident of Behar calculated the famine mortality at 200,000 in May ; the Resident of Murshidabad in June estimated that by that time three-eighths of the population of the province had died ; in July 500 died daily in that town ; in Birbhum 'many hundreds of villages are entirely depopulated and even in large towns not a fourth of the houses are inhabited.'... The estimate made by the Council in November 1772, and officially reported after its members had made circuits through the country in order to ascertain the state of things accurately, was that one-third of the population had died, and this, as Mr. Hunter remarks, implies the death of about 10 millions, as the whole population of Bengal in those days can hardly be estimated at less than 30 millions.... That the mortality was extremely great, there can be no doubt ; and its effects were visible for many years afterwards in the lowered revenues, the immense untilled areas, and the competition that arose among landholders to induce cultivators to settle on their estates.

About the amount of revenue which did not show a great falling off the next year and which, in some quarters, was set

against the common belief as to the extreme severity of the famine, the Famine Commissioners say :

But it is on record that this year's revenue was collected by measures of unusual severity... and the account given by Mr. Hunter of rise of the class of 'vagrant cultivators' seems to bear strong evidence to the dreadful depopulation of the country.

In 1783 there was a general failure of crop in certain parts of Northern India but Bengal was not affected by this famine to any considerable degree. But one thing is highly interesting and that is the framing of a plan and the mode of its execution by the Government for preventing future famines in India. Sir George Campbell's account of the Famine of 1783 says :

It was decided that buildings of solid masonry should be constructed to serve the purpose of perpetual granaries to the two provinces, Bengal and Behar, and the Chief Engineer prepared a plan for a circular building in Patna which still stands as a monument of past resolutions, bearing its inscription 'For the Perpetual Prevention of Famines in India', but empty and disused.

In 1943 the Foodgrains Policy Committee recommended (September 11) that "a central foodgrain reserve should be created" for meeting deficit in specified areas.

In 1783 the Government appointed a Committee with very drastic powers to prevent future famines but we have nothing on record to get an idea of the effects of their labours. We have only seen the proclamation issued by the Government through the Committee which has close resemblance to the orders and proclamations issued in 1943.

In 1866 Orissa and part of Bengal, especially Midnapore (western half—called the 'blackest portion of the famine track'), Bankura, Nadia, Murshidabad and Hughli, were visited by a severe famine which has been described thus :

Eventually the tide of famine raged so high all over Orissa that local inequalities may almost be submerged and lost sight of in one wide-spreading sea of calamity.

The details, as given by the Famine Commissioners, are as follows :

It was not till September 1865, that an alarm began to be felt about the rainfall.... The first alarm was given



about the middle of October and the fact soon became generally realised both by the official and the non-official community, that the premature cessation of rain must cause great injury to the harvest....The Collectors all applied for leave to make special enquiries into the condition of the crops, and the extent of the losses, with a view to deciding what amount of revenue should be remitted, *but this was discouraged by the Commissioners and refused by the Board of Revenue, who again later on (in January) absolutely rejected the proposal that any remission should be granted.* In the end of November the Board sent up a comprehensive report to the Government of Bengal, which was based on reports received from the Commissioners of Divisions.... Some Collectors considered the crop would be three-fourth, some half, some as little as one-fourth, or even one-eighth of an average.... the Board's opinion was that the crop would be at least *half of an average one, and in Eastern Bengal not much under an average one.* Such a crop by itself provides food for the people, even though the stocks in hand might be, as they probably were, much below the usual amount ; and this being the case, there could be no famine. (*Italics mine.*)

How much like the over-confidence pervading the mind of the Governments of India and Bengal in 1943 !

Then again :

In November and December more and more urgent reports were sent up from Puri, in which district the famine first declared itself, of the extreme distress of the people and of the prevalence of deaths from starvation.... By the end of January prices had gone up near or at which rate they stood till the end of March. *The necessity of importation was earnestly pressed on the Board at this time (March), but in vain....* In February distress began to show itself acutely (in Balasore) taking the *form of an influx of starving people into the headquarter town, and an outbreak of grain robberies. But the extent of the impending calamity was still far from realized.* (*Italics mine.*)

On the 28th March, Sir Arthur Cotton pressed the Government for the 'organisation of a great system of public works but even then the Government of Bengal denied the necessity of any such scheme'.

The Commissioners say :

In April the mortality and distress became very severe. ...In May the attention of the public in Calcutta was

awakened, a Relief Committee formed, and subscriptions collected, but the *Board of Revenue still doubted whether there was really any great deficiency of food or any necessity for Government to interfere by any new measures.* (Italics mine.)

In spite of the apparent disregard on the part of the Board of Revenue (or the Government of Bengal) the famine refused to abate and the

facts were now at last beginning to be too plain for any misunderstanding. On the 26th May the Superintending Engineer telegraphed that a grant (to Balasore) of Rs. 60,000 for relief works was of no use : *"We want rice"* and on the 28th the Commissioner telegraphed that the rice required for the troops, the prisoners and the Government establishments (at Cuttack and elsewhere) could no longer be procured. *On receipt of the message the Lieutenant-Governor gave way and sent order on the 29th May that importation of rice by Government must immediately be begun.* (Italics mine.)

The several relief organisations set up by the public in Calcutta as well as in other districts of Bengal in 1943 had close resemblance to the conditions that prevailed in 1866 and are contained in the following statement of the Relief Commissioners :

*The mortality was highest in August, consequent on the heavy storms of rain. The people were then in the lowest stage of exhaustion ; the emaciated crowds, collected at the feeding stations, had no sufficient shelter, and the cold and wet seem to have killed them in fearful numbers.* (Italics mine.)

The history of the famine in the most affected parts of Midnapore and (Bengal) corresponds pretty closely to that of 1943 and it is for this reason that the "Orissa Famine of 1866" has been dealt with at some length. We do not know whether any future Famine Commission going into the details of the famine of 1943 will have to say the same thing as the Famine Commissioners, Sir George Campbell, Colonel Morton and Mr. H. L. Dampier, did with regard to famine in 1866.

The Board of Revenue was censured by the Famine Commissioners and in their 'apologia', dated the 15th August, 1867, in para 21 :

admit unreservedly that...the measures adopted for the relief of the sufferers from famine to have been insuffi-

ent, and that nothing but the importation of food by the Government and that at a very early date, would have enabled the local officers to grapple, in any degree, successfully with the famine.

In para 196 the Board account for the delay which occurred in regard to the adoption of effectual measures to meet the famine thus :

- (a) ....
- (b) the same want (as the want of experience of famine by the peoples themselves) of experience on the part of the administration, local and central, prevented them from realising the full significance of the phenomena that did present themselves, as officers accustomed to famine might have done ;
- (c) money was of little use, for it could not be exchanged for food ;
- (d) neither would even this circumstance have materially paralyzed the power of the Government but for this, that to be at all largely effectual, it was necessary that the *discovery of the full truth should be made, and very extensive measures adopted, many months before the actual outburst of unmistakable famine occurred.* (Italics mine.)

In para 198 the Revenue Board made a frank confession of their guilt and expressed profuse regrets for their conduct, but unfortunately millions had gone by that time to a place where regrets and apologies could not soothe the ears and pacify the minds of the hearers. The Board said :

As regards themselves they frankly admit and regret that they did not even without the orders of the Government institute in December a closer enquiry into the outturn generally of the harvest. They believe now that such an enquiry might possibly have led to a timely discovery of the full extent of the coming evil and of the appropriate remedy. They *regret* that they did not grant remissions of revenue in December 1865. They *regret* further ...they did not comprehend the important significance of Mr. Ravenshaw's telegram of 31st January, which, if followed up, might again possibly have proved the means of discovering what was hidden from the authorities.

The residents of Calcutta and other district towns found a repetition of events of 1866 with regard to emigrants flocking to towns. Says the Report :

*Treatment of Emigrants:* Mention has already been

with the great export of 700,000 tons of rice which go yearly from British Burma, still the Government of India might very reasonably and fairly consider the expediency of interposing (by legislation if necessary), to prevent exportation of food from Bengal.

On November 21, 1873, the British Indian Association submitted a most gloomy memorial estimating the outturn of the winter rice crop of all Bengal (Orissa excepted) at only three-eighths of an average one. They warned against 'reliance on the existence of any food crops in the country' and 'urged on the Government the duty of prohibiting exports of rice... and of making large importations of food.

The Government of India expressed their disapproval and on December 1, the Secretary of State supported the Viceroy's decision in the matter.

On January 30, 1874, the Viceroy (Lord Northbrooke) wrote :

Rice was sent to British Indian ports including Ceylon ...to the West Indies, Mauritius and other places mostly for the use of Indian coolies (emigrants) and to England and Persian Gulf. It would have been unjust to stop the supply of the usual food of the Bengal coolies in the colonies.... The prohibition would have excited confidence unduly and lowered prices, consumption would have been stimulated instead of being reduced, which is the natural effect of a rise of prices and the *greatest safeguard against famine*. (Italics mine.)

The same old argument, be it the Indian coolies or the *Indian soldiers in the Middle East, England, the Persian Gulf* and the neighbouring places ! Export of foodgrains should go unimpeded whether people in India require it or not.

As regards relief organisations, the Lt.-Governor dwelt very strongly on the necessity of extending the system down to the village itself, and of not acting as if they were in a strange hostile country, but utilising those whose duty it is to assist the people, and finally through them, or in the last resort without them, to get at the headmen and representatives of the people themselves. The following quotation shows the confidence he placed in these organisations :

When the arrangement we are now making in the most distressed districts is complete, I trust that we shall be

able to lay our hands on each person requiring relief according to residence and circumstances. We shall be able to say in each village— here are so many persons found to be fit objects for relief ; so many are doing work of some sort ; so many are receiving charitable allowance of food ; so many have received or will receive advances to enable them to continue their cultivation ; so many residents of this village absent from working on such a public work...

The country was divided into circles, of from 50 to 100 villages, each circle to be an unit of relief administration, supervised by a European or Native officer with a staff of subordinates and at least with one grain depot from which the smaller granaries in the circle should be supplied ; the object being that all relief operations should be inspected at least once a week, and supplies distributed in every severely distressed village.

With regard to the management of Relief Works, Sir George Campbell's view was that :

To render effectual aid to the people, it is of all things most necessary that work should be offered in good time, so that the existence of public works may be known to the people at large, and those who stand in need of work may find their way to the work and be suitably provided for, before the greatest stress comes. All experience shows that work is wanted to avert starvation rather than to save people already half starved and unfit for work... There can be no surer test of the state of the country,— no barometer, as it were,— by which the condition of people can be better gauged than the degree to which they seek employment on public works.

The year 1875-76 witnessed another severe scarcity of food in Bengal, and fortunately for her people, passed off without causing any great loss of life. The same has been the case with the famine of 1892.

"In 1879 England sent a message to India that the people must not be allowed to die of starvation. But the Commissioners who bore the message, found that much more was necessary than to provide the starving people with food when famine was on them. It was necessary, they found, to secure to them a normal condition of strength and health...", wrote Sir E. C. Buck in 1895.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sir E. C. Buck, Kt., C. S. I., Secretary to the Government of India in the *Statistical Atlas of India*.—"Droughts and Famines", 1895.

Fifty years have elapsed since the message was delivered to the people of this country. Neither "future" famines have been prevented nor the health and strength secured for the people of the country.

The years 1897 to 1900 proved to be a period of severe scarcity for the whole of Northern India, including Bengal (Bankura, Nadia, Murshidabad Khulna, and also Madras), and famine was declared in 1897 and again in 1900. The famine of 1897 was said to be "the most intense and the most widely extended yet known" and relief operations failed to produce the desired effect. Bombay, Madras and the Central Provinces suffered more than all the other provinces combined together and the death-roll mounted up to a million or more. In 1900, the severity of the famine was most terrible in the Central Provinces, Bengal escaping with slight injury.

During these famines governmental relief operations could not satisfy the people. Hundreds were living in the several relief camps when the Delhi Durbar was held in 1902 with *unparalleled grandeur and at enormous expenses*. This was possible in India alone. No other government, in any part of the world, could think of holding such a pageantry at a time when the country had not been able to shake off the effects of a devastating famine.

After about a quarter of a century, Bengal was visited in 1943 by one of the worst famines that history has ever recorded. Parts of the Provinces of Orissa, Bombay, and Madras, and the States of Cochin and Travancore were also affected by this famine. Orissa witnessed some hundreds of deaths from starvation, while Cochin, Travancore, Madras and Bombay escaped, by judicious handling of the situation, without any serious loss of human life. Time will only prove that the Bengal Famine of 1943 has been one of the greatest catastrophes that scourged mankind and was more ruthless than the greatest War that smote the World from pole to pole from September 3, 1939, onwards. The trails of misery have not yet disappeared and we are not sure if this would be the last famine in Bengal in the fourth decade of the twentieth century.

## THE MARCH OF EVENTS

FOR a comprehensive study of the causes that led to the famine of 1943, it is necessary to carefully watch the actions and scan the statements of high officials of both the Central and the Provincial Governments from the very beginning of the War.

That a situation like that of 1943 was bound to come ought to have been anticipated by those who had declared war on the Axis powers on behalf of India. India, willingly or unwillingly has played a great part in the present War, it may be a more glorious part in gallantry and sacrifice than of Britain herself. Committees and Boards relating to food were set up as quickly as chance permitted and in 1941, instead of a Food Department being created, a Standing Committee was set up to help the Supply Department in "the procurement of foodstuffs for the Defence Services of India and overseas". From October 1939 to September 1942, there were six Price Control Conferences in Delhi. In April 1942, the Food Advisory Council was created. The Food Department came into existence in December of the same year. In April 1943, Regional Food Commissioners were brought into existence and three Food Members were appointed in quick succession, to supervise the whole show. Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, held the portfolio for sometime after Mr. Nalini Ranjan Sarker had resigned. There were other officers and appointments, too many to mention, but with all that 1943 proved to be one of the darkest chapters of British rule in India.

Another drama was being enacted in the province of Bengal itself. Since the formation of the Coalition Cabinet in December 1941, with Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq as Premier, Sir John Herbert, the then Governor of Bengal, became "not only unsympathetic but in many cases positively obstructive". There were "interference and obstruction in matters of day to day administration" and the Finance Minister, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee resigned on November 16, 1942, on this issue.<sup>1</sup> On December

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B.

14 and 15, the first Food Conference was held in Delhi, where, as revealed in the statement of the then Food Member to the Government of India, the Hon'ble Sir Azizul Huque, of August 9, 1943, in the Central Assembly, Mr. Fazlul Huq, the then Premier of Bengal, had said :

We do not require for the next few months any rice even though we are in deficit.

And

We know rice is enough for us. We do require some wheat from outside.

The statement of Sir Azizul Huque of August 9, 1943 has found a place in the White Paper of the British Government. In the background of Mr. Fazlul Huq's statement in the Food Conference, there were other more weighty utterances of officials of the Central Government. The Hon'ble Mr. Nalini Ranjan Sarker, the then Member for Education, Health and Lands said on April 6, 1942 :

Owing to the extension of rice cultivation in areas released from jute, and favourable weather, the rice deficit in Bengal has been converted into a large surplus of  $13\frac{1}{2}$  lakh tons.

Sir Azizul Huque, said on August 9, 1943, in the statement just referred to above,

the rice crop of 1941 was a surplus crop in Bengal by about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  million tons over the normal average, thus providing a fair carry over for the following year.

After the resignation of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the trouble in the Bengal Government began to be more acute and the policy of the Governor, Sir John Herbert, was not very conducive to the solution of the rice problem in Bengal. A few days after his return from the first Food Conference, the Hon'ble Mr. Fazlul Huq, the Bengal Premier, protested against the rice policy of the Governor (on January 9, 1943), but in vain. Earlier, in August 1942, he had protested against the 'boat removal policy' with no better result.<sup>1</sup>

On March 31, 1943, the Hon'ble Mr. Fazlul Huq's Ministry went out of office. What was the rice position at that time in

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix C.



Bengal? The Hon'ble the Chief Minister for Bengal, Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin, in a speech in the Muslim League Conference held in New Delhi on November 15, 1943, said that when he took office, on April 24, 1943, the Government of India had announced their Basic Plan under which Bengal was to get 793,000 tons of foodgrains. Then this arrangement must have been made prior to Sir Nazimuddin's taking charge of the Province.

On April 27, Mr. Fazlul Huq stated that he had heard reports of a post mortem examination where grass was found in the stomach of a dead man.

On May 4, 1943, a Civil Supplies Press Note stated that the Hon'ble Minister is convinced that any deficit this year can be fully met from the carry-over of the 1941-42 crop, and as a result of the steps which are being taken to rationalise consumption, and to popularise the increased use substitute foodgrains, as well as the reduction in consumption due to the high price level. The public may, therefore, rest assured that there is no cause to fear any ultimate shortage of foodgrains.

On May 7, the Civil Supplies Minister, Mr. Suhrawardy, said that the solution was in sight and also "...if the hoards of Bengal could be made more mobile, the situation could be eased."<sup>1</sup>

In 1966, the view of the Government was that :

There were no genuine dearth, large stores being in the hands of dealers...who are keeping back stocks out of greed.

1 Compare :

Para 192. "As respects the ample stores of grains in the province, it had been shown that Mr. T. E. Ravenshaw (the Commissioner) originally held that grain would be forthcoming, and that, notwithstanding he had subsequently recommended the importation of grain, he repeated his former opinion during the Lieutenant Governor's (Sir Cecil Beadon) visit on February 13, 1866.

Para 208. "...that the Commissioner of Cuttack had a confident belief in the existence of stores of grain, only kept back by grain dealers to enhance the price."

Para 417. "We must think that his action generally (up to a certain point) unfortunate, and, that in particular Mr. Ravenshaw yielded injudiciously to a mere popular cry regarding the existence of stocks kept back by wicked grain dealers."—Report of the Famine Commission, 1867, on Bengal & Orissa Famine of 1866.

The Finance Minister said on the very next day : "in a short time the situation will greatly improve". Simultaneously with the Finance Minister, the Civil Supplies Minister said that "there was sufficiency of foodgrains for the people of Bengal".

A statement was issued on behalf of Government both in Bengali and in English, captioned "An Appeal and A Warning" in which the Minister asked "Is there a real shortage of food in Bengal?" and the answer was : "No, most certainly no." And this the Hon'ble Mr. Suhrawardy said in the face of soaring prices of foodstuffs all over Bengal.

On May 13, 1943, the Hon'ble Sir Azizul Huque, Hon'ble Mr. Suhrawardy and Major General Wood, Secretary, Food Department, Government of India, tried to prove by elaborate statistics, which had absolutely no relation to actual facts, that there was no shortage of foodstuffs in Bengal and that "psychological factors were among the main causes for shortage of essential foodstuffs and the rise of prices".

On May 15, 1943, that is just two days after the Press Conference mentioned above, the Hon'ble Sir Azizul Huque, at Krishnagar, "stressed the accuracy of the figures recently published by Government regarding rice and maintained that Bengal was not yet deficit in rice".

On May 30, 1943, the Civil Supplies Minister, "did not wish to say that there was not enough rice in Bengal or that enough rice would not be coming from outside."

In the last week of May public statements were supported by pictorial advertisements as well as cinema shows of "staggering loads of rice arriving in Calcutta." These loads reported to have arrived at Calcutta seemed thereafter to have gone astray.

The restriction on "free trade" with the Eastern Provinces (Bihar, Orissa and Assam) and the States was removed on May 17.

Some efforts were made to induce the Transport Member to the Government of India to make arrangements for the flow of foodgrains to Bengal. To which he replied on May 19, that "he

would do everything in his power to facilitate the movement of foodstuffs from other provinces to Bengal". Then the Ministers or Advisers, as the case might have been, were approached. No sooner had the Bengal Minister expressed satisfaction at the result of such interviews, than the public were regaled— on the very next day, to be sure,— with statements from responsible Ministers and Advisers opposing such arrangement. Giving out his mind on the Government of India Order which sought to create an Eastern Zone of Free Trade, Sir Md. Saadulla, the Premier of Assam, said :

‘I have been compelled to lodge a dignified and vigorous protest with the Central Government’ and ‘I appeal to our traders and also to our growers not to export rice and paddy for temporary gain’.

On the same day a Press message from Orissa disclosed that ‘the Premier of Orissa was leaving for Delhi to personally impress on the Government of India the difficulties created in Orissa by the recent order removing the Provincial Government control over the movement and prices of rice and other food-grains’.

As regards Bihar, the Premier of Bengal, Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin, said at Delhi on May 28, that he could not understand why Bihar, a section 93 province under officialdom, was not co-operating with Bengal in respect of food supply. The Secretary, Bihar Landholders’ Association, made a statement at Patna, on June 9, to the following effect :

I fully appreciate the difficulties of the Local Government (Bihar) created by the removal of the inter-provincial restriction and the introduction of what is called the free trade policy.... There is one thing which the Provincial Government can do. And that is to state that they will grant no facilities to other provinces in their attempt to starve Bihar and that, if necessary, the Provincial Government will buy all foodgrains required for Bihar and supply to those in this province who want them most.

In 1770 the distress was the ‘acuteest in Behar’ and efforts to get supplies from Allahabad and elsewhere met with dubious success. In 1943 we approached the Provinces, including the

Governors' Provinces (Section 93 Provinces as they are called) and the States for almost the same result.<sup>1</sup>

The Bengal Government in their helplessness devised their province-wide food drive to be launched on June 7 and "The Bengal Foodgrains Inquiries and Control Order"<sup>2</sup> was published on June 4, 1943, providing that

an authorised Officer may, together with such persons as he may consider necessary, enter upon any premises where he has reason to believe that foodgrains have been stocked, etc.

and an Ordinance was passed to the effect

that any matter intended or likely to incite opposition to, or non-participation in measures to be taken in Bengal to prevent, detect or deal with hoarding and hoarders of foodgrains shall, before publication be submitted for scrutiny to the Press Adviser.

The feasibility of such a measure was doubted but the people willingly submitted to such province-wide search in the hope of getting rice at a reasonable price. On June 30, at New Delhi, the Civil Supplies Minister 'expressed satisfaction at the result

1 Said Maj. Gen. Wood, Secretary, Food Department, Government of India, before the Council of State in August 1943 :

"On January 26, the Central Government published the first outline of its plan (the Basic plan) for the distribution of the surpluses of India ; ... that plan was unanimously accepted by all Provinces and States in India.

"At the end of February...there was only one final obstacle...and that was the determination of how much surplus each surplus Province would surrender and how much should each deficit Government receive... Recognising the contentious nature of Indian statistics, the Central Government said, in effect, 'None of us know whether these figures are really true and no amount of argument can prove it one way or the other. They can only be proved by action.'

"To this request that they do their best to reach the target figures... the figures so prescribed were neither binding obligations nor contracts but represented a level of endeavour, the Central Government *received a chilly response*." (Italics mine.)

2 Any surplus stock in excess of six months' requirements on the following basis was either removed from or sealed in owners' premises for subsequent removal.

On the assumption that the village people take more food than the urban people the Government fixed the following scheduled rate of ration for the people :—For agriculturists and labourers owing surplus stocks adult males engaged in physical labour ten chataks of rice, other adult males eight, adult females seven, children below 14 years six and for those (including agriculturists and labourers not owing sufficient stocks of their own and for urban population generally) adult males seven and half chataks, adult females six and half chataks and children below 14 years five and half chataks.

of the food (anti-hoarding) drive'. But on the 12th July, in the Bengal Assembly, he said :

that the general picture that he might present to the House was that practically in all places deficits have been reported.

Nonetheless, this operation cost Bengal not less than Rs. 16.60 lakhs.

In this connection the Government circular issued during the famine of 1783 may be compared with that of the Minister for Civil Supplies, Bengal in 1943 :

There was also a proclamation against "hoarding and buying up grain" in 1770.

In 1783 :

We direct that you do in the most public manner issue orders by beat of tom-tom, in all the bazars and gunges in the district under your charge, declaring that if any merchant shall conceal his grain, refuse to bring it to market and sell it at a reasonable price, he will not only be punished himself in the most exemplary manner, but his grain will be seized and distributed among the poor.

The Bengal Minister on May 7, 1943 proclaimed :

I have already warned all hoarders<sup>1</sup> including the agri-

<sup>1</sup> Comments of Sir Purushotamdas Thakurdas on 'Hoarding' : *Commerce*, October 28, 1943.

"Bearing this (want of dependable statistics) in mind, the shibboleth regarding hoarding, which has been advanced by some Government spokesmen in India and by others in England, would be based on ignorance that the Governments in India have few statistics worth any credence. Whilst one does not defend what is called hoards for the purpose of profiteering, a distinction has to be made that retention of what a man grows on his own land cannot be run down as wicked hoarding. I suggest that it is the tendency of the Indian grower not to part with all his produce, especially grain (relying on Government to get foodgrain in case of failure of rains next year) unless he has need to that has saved the situation so far. For, indeed, if more had been brought to the market, say a year back, the Government of India would have let more go out of the country for the benefit of either military or civil requirements elsewhere, and the situation to-day would have become accentuated still further. Even, at present I am not convinced that those who are compelling villagers to part with their foodgrains are doing a service, because all this must react on the tendency to grow foodgrains owing to the harassment which is involved in any process which requires a Government underling to visit people in their homes in the rural areas. There has been complete unanimity in India that hoards by middlemen who hold out for higher prices must be prevented effectively, and one wishes that the Government machinery is directed effectively in this direction."

culturist hoarders that if they do not bring their stock on to the market, they will lose in the long run. I am determined to use all the powers of the Government to see...that these hoards are disgorged, and preliminary steps, which these gentlemen may find drastic, have already been taken... I am giving a chance to the people to do it voluntarily, while I perfect my plans to make them disgorge their hoards. If they do not listen to my warning let them not think that they can run their hoards underground or that they will be able to succeed in dissipating the hoards.

There were several other announcements, etc., on this subject threatening ultimate freezing of the concealed stock.

In April 1865, the conscience of the munificent public in different towns, particularly in Calcutta was roused to the gravity of the situation and relief committees were formed to take steps for mitigating distress.

In July (1943) when the situation became critical and people began to wander about for food, the Civil Supplies Minister announced in the Bengal Council the starting of gruel kitchens in different parts of Chittagong. With regard to the beggars in Calcutta he said :

They can be looked after by the charitably disposed people here.<sup>1</sup>

But in fact these charitably disposed people had been looking after a large number of these wanderers long before the Minister had an inkling of it. This was a form of indirect taxation which the Government wilfully encouraged.

In 1943, save that sufficient store was being held for the troops, the prisoners and members of the essential services, no provisions were made to meet the exigencies of the situation.

While the Ministers were speaking of sufficiency and making

<sup>1</sup> With regard to "Reliance on Local Charity", the Famine Commissioners wrote in their Report of April 6, 1867 :

"Experience has very amply proved that although this may suffice to meet small or even in some cases considerable, local distress, it is a source wholly inadequate to meet anything approaching to severe or general famine... The efficient relief of famine, or of very general distress affecting considerable portions of such districts, cannot be approached by the means to be obtained from this source. Where general and excessive distress spreads over such districts, the resources of local charity are completely overtaxed and paralysed."

no serious efforts to check the impending famine, the people were passing through great distress due to high prices of rice and other necessities of life. On July 3, 1943, "the District Magistrate declared a serious shortage of rice at Chittagong" and in a message dated the 14th July, delayed in transmission, the Bar Association and the Presidents of the Different Union Boards wired to the authorities "informing them of a horrible state of famine" in Bhola (Barisal) and "asking for relief without delay". Pictures of acute distress in the districts began pouring in from every part of Bengal at this time.

On May 30, 1943, the Civil Supplies Member exhorted his audience in South Calcutta "to preach before the public the evils of over-eating." His other slogan for the people was, "Eat Less," etc. It was not really known that the idea did not originate from the Hon'ble Minister, but was a mere paraphrase of the statement of a Secretary of State for India in 1873-74 who, as has been stated before, once said "lowered consumption is the greatest safeguard against famine."

The people of Bengal had been living on lowered consumption for the past two years and his advice to "Eat Less" and "to get themselves habituated to substitute food as far as possible" tendered on August 4, was a mere waste of ministerial breath. When people do not get food they try to subsist on whatever they can find, not to speak of "substitute food". The famine was there even if the Ministers refused to accept it as such.

The prices had been soaring higher and higher in thorough disregard of Governmental threats, and "controlled" commodities gradually disappeared from the market. There was a black market for the rich, and even the dead knew that it *existed* but our Civil Supplies Minister, when asked at a Press Conserence on September 1, 1943, said that "*he was not aware of its existence either officially or non-officially. To those who were withholding stocks he had given them a stern warning.*"

Inspite of all tall talks of tackling the problem successfully people began to die on the streets and dead bodies would lie on the pavements for days on end without anybody to take care of them.

Sir J. P. Srivastava, the present Food Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, said on August 27, 1943 :

The key to the solution of the present difficult situation in this region is not one of economic policy but of practical, efficient and bold administration and the Provinces must see such an administration is set up without delay if it has not been done already.

He was pleased to pass judgment on the action of the inert Bengal Ministry and the Hon'ble Ministers at the Centre. The whole Government was found napping. On August 30, 1943, he gave out to the *Associated Press* that

He recalled that during his visit to Calcutta last November, he had consulted almost every section of opinion in Calcutta whether there was any danger of the food situation in Bengal deteriorating. No one seemed to have any misgivings in this direction at that time and he went away satisfied that there would be no shortage of food.

All credit to the permanent officials of the "Steel Frame"! Concluding his statement he had the frankness to admit : The fact of the matter is that we have all erred and the main thing now for us is to get together and do all we can.

He was not satisfied with mere speaking out his mind to the Press. On September 8, 1943, at a Press Conference at Lahore, the Food Member further said :

There is very acute shortage of foodstuffs in Bengal and the next three months are going to be crucial. The only way to tide over the situation is to get whatever grain one can have either by seizing, borrowing or stealing from other parts of India. This is the only method to save the starving millions of Bengal.

On September 11, 1943, Sir Jagadish Prasad, ex-Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, said, "Bengal is faced with one of the worst famines in living memory".

Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, whose earlier public statements had failed to disclose the gravity of the situation, conceded on October 10, that "Bengal is in the grip of an unprecedented famine". Mr. L. Amery, the Secretary of State, noted for his most irresponsible actions about and utterances on India, the man who on October 14, had depicted the conditions prevailing in Bengal



as "scarcity<sup>1</sup> verging on famine" and had spoken of them merely as "these distressing conditions", was at last forced to admit the next day and speak of "the grievous condition of famine in Bengal".

1 With regard to the word "scarcity" the remark of the Famine Commissioners, 1867, will be of great interest. It goes on :

"It will be self-evident in the whole of our proceedings that there is an extraordinary discrepancy in regard to the use of the word "*famine*" by different persons. In some of the earliest papers the word was freely used ; but the failure having been early called in official documents "scarcity" and no famine, it seems as if, as the scarcity and want became more intense, the official use of the term "famine" was gradually pushed back into narrower and narrower limits. The Board of Revenue, in their Administration Report of 20th August, 1866, under the heading "The Scarcity" seem to maintain that there was no "famine" in Orissa till the very last days of May, and they appear, in fact, to desire to restrict the word to the case when there is not food to be had for money as distinguished from suffering from dearness and want of means to buy... *We shall use the word "famine" in its ordinary and popular acceptation of suffering from hunger on the part of large classes of the population.*" (Italics mine.)

## EXPORT OF FOODGRAINS

A PRUDENT householder will never think of depleting his stock of foodgrains by selling or otherwise transferring it if he cannot replenish it from the market at will. A Government responsible for the life and welfare of its people, would likewise, never think of feeding the people of foreign lands when scarcity or famine looms large in view in its own.

Unfortunately for India, the interests of the people and its Government are never identical ; for they are invariably at cross purposes. During British rule, Bengal, nay the whole of India, has been visited by famines of such magnitude that they would have stained the history of any government with the darkest patch.

But what is the history of the export of foodgrains by the Government of India during the famine ?

The first recorded famine during British rule in Bengal was that of 1770. During the worst phase of the famine unrestricted export depleted the stock of the country. According to George Thomson :

To add to the horror with which we are called to regard the last dreadful carnage (of the Bengal Famine) we are made acquainted by the returns of the Customs Houses with the fact that as much grain was exported from the lower parts of Bengal as would have fed the number who perished for a whole year.<sup>1</sup>

There was a ban on export,—no one knows when it had been imposed,—which “was taken off on the 14th November 1770”. Nobody took the ban seriously and the result of the “embargo on exportation” can best be gauged by its results.

Then we come on to the next severe famine in Bengal, best known as the ‘Orissa Famine’ of 1866. Not less than one million people died in this famine. But what was the attitude, even

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1 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 9, 1943.

then, of the Government of India ? Let the readers judge of it from the statistics of export during the period.

#### EXPORT OF RICE AND WHEAT DURING 1863-64 TO 1868-69

		Rice		Wheat	
		Tons	Rs.	Qrs.	Rs.
1863-64	...	814,700	3,97,55,650	63,082	7,86,760
1864-65	...	901,550	5,57,35,370	58,549	11,02,650
1865-66	...	691,000	5,24,79,180	49,889	—
1866-67	...	602,700	3,29,50,930	Cwts	7,68,960
1867-68	...	612,850	3,64,70,080	290,385	10,13,080
1868-69	...	752,550	4,21,09,250	275,481	9,87,600

The above figures just give an idea of the exports during its continuance and the time when the famine was over.

In 1873-74 Bengal was visited by another famine of great intensity. As has been stated in a previous article, the then Lt.-Governor of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Sir George Campbell, wanted to stop the export of rice from India to other countries because of the serious food situation in the country. His objection was overruled by the Viceroy and the Secretary of State.<sup>1</sup> The export of foodgrains went on unabated and during the worst year of the famine no less than one million tons of rice and ninety thousand tons of wheat were exported from the country.

#### EXPORT OF RICE AND WHEAT FROM 1872-73 TO 1878-79

		Rice		Wheat	
		Tons	Rs.	Tons	Rs.
1872-73	...	1,164,700	5,76,10,300	19,700	16,76,900
1873-74	...	1,012,250	5,54,97,980	87,798	82,76,060
1874-75	...	869,650	4,76,53,340	53,683	49,14,510
1875-76	...	1,020,800	5,31,10,950	1,25,538	90,63,310
1876-77	...	995,700	5,81,52,210	2,79,330	1,95,76,400
1877-78	...	921,400	6,95,03,860	3,18,650	2,83,77,650
1878-79	...	1,062,500	8,97,89,510	52,850	5,20,138

There were several cases of famine in India after 1873-74, such as that in Madras in 1877 ; in Northern India in 1878 ; again in Madras in 1899 ; in Madras, Bengal, Burma and Ajmer in 1892 ; in Northern India, Bengal, Burma, Madras and Bombay in 1897. The famine conditions continued till 1900 killing hundreds of thousands of people in the affected areas. As a

<sup>1</sup> Compare pp. 12-13.

comprehensive case we may study the exports of foodgrains during the period 1892-93 and 1900-01, while some part or other of India suffered from scarcity. This will go a long way to expose how the mind of our Rulers works when the lives of the people of India are threatened.

#### EXPORT OF RICE AND WHEAT DURING 1892-93 TO 1900-01

		Rice		Wheat	
		Tons	Rs.	Tons	Rs.
1892-93	..	1,396,900	12,40,67,190	748,650	7,44,03,830
1893-94	..	1,232,500	10,38,57,710	628,300	5,19,39,850
1894-95	..	1,722,150	13,69 25,200	344,500	2,56,62,470
1895-96	...	1,758,100	13,53,70,470	500,200	3,91,38,960
1896-97	...	1,414,050	11,94,71,220	95,550	83,63,950
1897-98	...	1,337,300	11,70,50,190	119,600	1,34,11,510
1898-99	...	1,897,100	15,81,27,000	976,000	9,71,96,880
1899-00	...	1,613,550	13,09,61,715	485,200	3,90,93,460
1900-01	...	1,567,150	13,21,76,160	2,500	3,00,825

R. C. Dutt has commented, in his inimitable way, on the famine conditions in India and the genesis of export during scarcity. He has also explained what the "recuperative power" of the Indian people means ; and I make no apology in quoting him at length for the enlightenment of the readers :

The trade of India is not natural but forced ; the export of foodgrains is made under compulsion to meet an excessive Land Revenue demand. The year 1897-98 was a year of widespread famine in India, and millions of people died of starvation. Nevertheless, the Land Revenue was collected to the amount of 17 million sterling ; and cultivators paid it largely by selling their foodgrains, which were exported to the amount of 10 million sterling in that calamitous year. In the following year the crops were good. The agriculturists sold large quantities of their produce to replace their plough cattle, and to repair the losses of the previous famine year. Unfortunately, too, the Government realised the arrears of the Land Revenue with a vigour as inconsiderate as it was unwise ; and vast quantities of the new produce had to be sold to meet this pressing Land Revenue demand. Both these causes operated to increase the export of food-

grains to a figure which it had never reached before. Those who judged the prosperity of India by its revenue collection were jubilant. A Land Revenue collection of over 18 million sterling gave them the evidence they relied upon. *The usual misleading statements were made in India, and in the House of Commons, about the recuperative power of India.* Few cared to inquire if the enormous exports and the enormous Land Revenue collection had left any stores of food among the people. (Italics mine.)<sup>1</sup>

The Bengal famine of 1943, is admitted to have been caused by the folly and carelessness of man. Along with other reasons export contributed not a little to the causation of this famine.

In October 1941, a Standing Committee was formed to help the Supply Department "on the procurement of foodstuffs for the Defence Services in India and overseas".

The accepted policy of the Government of India in February 1942<sup>2</sup> was that :

India, particularly suited to meet the requirements of the Empire and the various theatres of war in the Middle East and elsewhere, has harnessed all its available resources to maintain a regular food supply in sufficient quantity and of desired standard quality for the Defence Force in the country and abroad.

While the export should have been stopped long before the crisis had come upon us, it was allowed "in the interests of the labouring population in Ceylon and elsewhere and for the maintenance of the production of vital war supplies."

According to Mr. Nalini Ranjan Sarker, the then Member for Education, Health and Lands, the Government of India was faced with, on February 18, 1942 :

the important problem of keeping India's fighting forces fully supplied with the best of food in order to sustain their health and spirits.

Considering that the imports had been gradually dwindling due to the continuance of the War, it is curious that a very huge export was allowed to feed the people of other lands while the shadow of famine was hourly lengthening on the Indian horizon.

<sup>1</sup> Economic History of India in the Victorian Age, p. 534.

<sup>2</sup> Indian Information, February 1, 1942, p. 138.

The real situation was completely overlooked. The balance of all foodgrains retained in the country after net import and export, sometimes, such as in 1939-40, amounted to more than two million tons ; while in 1942-43, due to heavy export and a small import, India forthwith became poorer by 360,622 tons from her own stock, out of which rice and paddy accounted for 258,684 tons. On the face of it 80,000 tons of foodgrains were exported during the first seven months of 1943-44.

The balance in favour or against the total food position in India will be clear from the following tables. The people will now judge whether the "fable of exports" (Major-Genl. Wood in Council of State on August 13, 1943) has not had something to do with the realistic story of the Bengal famine of 1943.

#### IMPORTS AND EXPORTS OF ALL FOODGRAINS BY SEA AND THE NET BALANCE

Excess (+) and Deficit (—)

	Imports Tons	Exports Tons	Balance Tons
1937-38	1,596,138	966,834	+ 624,304
1938-39	1,871,693	827,991	+ 1,043,702
1939-40	2,713,632	492,714	+ 2,220,918
1940-41	1,549,182	556,267	+ 992,915
1941-42	1,202,149	770,997	+ 431,152
1942-43	18,541	379,170	— 360,622

#### IMPORTS AND EXPORTS OF RICE (AND PADDY) BY SEA AND THE NET BALANCE

Excess (+) and Deficit (—)

for each year from 1937-38 to 1942-43

	Imports Tons	Exports Tons	Balance Tons
1937-38    ...    ...	1,421,798	256,726	+ 1,165,072
1938-39    ...    ...	1,561,855	308,757	+ 1,235,098
1939-40    ...    ...	2,428,059	289,459	+ 2,138 600
1940-41    ...    ...	1,374,888	277,690	+ 1,097,198
1941-42    ...    ...	1,066,074	342,969	+ 723,105
1942-43    ...    ...	18,132	276,816	— 258,684

The press and the accredited leaders of the country joined in chorus protesting against the export policy of the Government of India. It went unheeded till signs of extreme exhaustion appeared on the horizon and people began to die on the streets

of Ganjam and Calcutta. A New Delhi message dated July 23, 1943, says :

In view of the gravity of rice position in India, the Central Government find it impossible to undertake, until further notice, further exports of rice from India.

This did not remove the suspicion and nervousness from the public mind, and cases of export were cited, from time to time, by the Indian Chamber of Commerce. This was partly contradicted and small exports of foodgrains, particularly of rice, were admitted by the Government. At long last the present Food Member, Sir J. P. Srivastava enunciated the Government policy on October 13, and was candid enough to express the conditions on which he would allow export :

These are : (1) for provisioning ships sailing from Indian ports for the use of the Indian seamen of the merchant navy, within the confines of the Indian Ocean ; (2) for the use of vital personnel on our air lines of communications in neighbouring countries—(their bare minimum necessities). The total quantities involved will be less than 1,000 tons a month.

In conclusion, it will not be out of place to quote the remarks of the Foodgrains Policy Committee (1943) on this knotty question of export. Says the report<sup>1</sup> :

It is only recently that the full significance of the loss of imports has been realised... The absence of imports not only seriously embarrasses the position of certain deficit areas, to an extent which is quite disproportionate to the absolute difference in India's food position as a whole by the cessation of imports, but also *seriously affects the sense of security generally*. From the point of view of re-assuring the public an earlier cessation of exports would have done something to compensate these adverse consequences of the cessation of imports. (Italics mine.)

In addition to wheat sales the Bengal Government earned a "gross revenue of Rs. 6.32 lakhs from re-sales of wheat products" to the starving people of Bengal.

The exploits of the Central Government were more interesting. The spirit of profiteering caught the Lords of the Centre and found easy victims in them. The Centre vied with Provinces like Bengal and Sind in making their pile, perhaps "to provide against bad days". Sardar Baldev Singh, the Punjab Development Minister, in a statement to the *Associated Press* at Lahore on October 24, said that "even the Government of India made a profit of one rupee per maund on wheat purchased on its behalf in the Punjab and sold to deficit provinces".

Sardarji's statement did not meet with an unmixed reception. There were many who had implicit faith in the integrity of the Central Government and thought that the Government of Lord Linlithgow was above all suspicion. The truth was out in the Central Assembly on November 17, 1943, when Sardar Sant Singh 'declared that as regards profiteering he knew that the Bengal Government made profits'. He also knew that 'the Central Government made a profit of Re. 1-2 a maund on wheat bought from the Punjab and sold to Bengal, and in this way made a profit of Rs. 1 crore. Was the Finance Member prepared to deny that ?

Sir Jeremy Raisman, the Finance Member to the Government of India, was heard to remark that he was prepared to give Rs. 10 for every one rupee which Sardar Sant Singh alleged had been made by the Central Government.

Sardar Sant Singh went on repeating the charge against the Central Government. The Finance Member interrupting him again, asked "if he supported taxation by Government to cover themselves against loss on food supplies".

One fails to understand how the Central Government could suffer a loss on food transaction when they had been keeping a clear margin of profit at Re. 1-2 per maund.

The climax of this controversy was reached on the next day. The Food Member, Sir J. P. Srivastava, said that "although all



the final bills of the agents had not been received yet" it appeared that the transaction "would leave the Central Government with a substantial profit".

Sardar Baldev Singh, who was witnessing this bout from a distance came out with a generous offer to the Central Government from Lahore on November 23.

According to the *Associated Press* message : "Referring to the Finance Member's offer that the Government of India would pay Rs. 10 for every rupee, if the charge of profiteering was proved, Sardarji said :

The admission has now been made by the Food Member that the Government of India has made a profit of annas eleven per maund according to their calculation. I expect the Finance Member to stand by his sporting offer, and Bengal in this case should expect the windfall of a large gift of over a crore of rupees. The fact remains that it was on our insistence alone that the admission of substantial profits made by the Government of India and other Governments has at last been forthcoming.

After this everybody expected that the Hon'ble the Finance Member should arrange for some relief to the people of Bengal but the expectation was never fulfilled.

How the Ministers or Members, benefited by the profit thus derived, received exposure in public, could be known from the statement issued by the Sind Ministry on December 19, 1943, in connection with their tussle with the Central Government over the fixation of price of foodgrains in the Province :

We want to abolish the development fund which was created for reconstruction purposes out of the profits made by the Sind Government through *the exports of surplus as it is criticised by the whole world.* (Italics mine.)

The Government of Bengal is a worse offender in this respect. Public criticism, which created a sense of guilt in the mind of the Sind Government, failed to produce any effect on the Government of Bengal. In fact they continued their grain trade, beyond September, with a large margin of profit, until the Government of India found it impossible to overlook it any

further. Said Mr. B. R. Sen, the Director General of Food, on February 21, 1944, in the Council of State :

...no wheat was imported into Calcutta from abroad during the months of July to September, 1943. In October 12,520 tons of wheat and 8,520 tons of flour were imported. In November 19,560 tons of wheat was imported and in December 31,450 tons. The price charged to the Bengal Government for this imported wheat was Rs. 7-5-0 per maund bagged warehouse and for wheat products Rs. 8-4-0 per maund. As regards the prices charged by the Bengal Government, from the 20th September, 1943, to the 1st of January, 1944, the price was Rs. 12-12-0 per maund of wheat delivered to the mills and from 1st January onwards the price had been reduced to Rs. 10-7-0 per maund. The mills were permitted to charge Rs. 14 a maund for atta and Rs. 19 a maund for flour from the 20th September to the end of December ; but these rates had been reduced to Rs. 11-8-0 a maund for atta and Rs. 14 for flour from 1st of January, 1944.

It can be easily surmised that had there been no gambling in the foodgrains trade by the several Governments the markets would not have registered such a steady rise in prices. The price, in such a case, would have been lower by a few rupees per maund of wheat or wheat products thus making it available to people of moderate means. It also could favourably react on the price of rice in the province.

The duties of all governments is to suppress profiteering in the face of a fast approaching famine. But when the authorities are suspected of gross profiteering, it is not possible for them to punish others guilty of the same or similar offences. Profiteering on the part of the Government, and of big hoarders, who sometimes trade in the name and on behalf of the Government of Bengal, was one of the main causes that precipitated the crisis. Such practice of profiteering by the Government is a repetition of events of the past. The remark of one of the many publishers of 'Capital' of Karl Marx, Messrs. Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd., is significant. It runs thus (page 777) :

In the year 1866 more than a million Hindus died of hunger in the Province of Orissa alone. Nevertheless,

the attempt was made to enrich the Indian treasury by the price at which the necessities of life were sold to the starving people.<sup>1</sup>

When history will be written in an unbiased atmosphere, the action of the Government in their "attempt" at enriching the treasury at the cost of dying million, will receive its due share of condemnation.

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1 There was also a 'grain trade' in 1770 and reference has been made to it at p. 4 ; see *ante*.

## THE PRICE MUDDLE

THE contribution of price muddle to the misery, devastation and death of 1943 has never been properly assessed. When things would be seen in their proper perspective, the simple truth would come to light that this single factor, more than anything else, brought about the general distress in the country—distress to those who were dead and gone as well as to those that survived.

Foodstuffs became scarce and starvation was the result. There was no complete disappearance of foodstuffs from the market. Had it been the case it would have affected the poor and the rich, the black and the white alike in villages and cities. The case was otherwise. The poor died while the rich and the upper middle class escaped with injuries proportionate to the length of their respective purses. It is thus clear that it was the high cost of foodstuffs that killed more men than did its actual non-availability.

The controversy whether there had been 'inflation' or 'normal currency expansion' due to war should have been shelved earlier. The Home Government and its mouthpiece the Central Government hotly 'contented that there was virtually no inflation' in India. These people, as the case usually is, had strong supporters in the economic journals conducted by European interests. And the matter did not receive the attention it deserved.

The question that was long debated was whether 'inflation' or 'shortage of supply' was the real cause of the rise in prices. It would have been better for the people, who had nothing to do with these problems but to die helplessly, if both inflation and shortage of supply had been accepted as the twin causes of high price. In times of stress it is extremely important to ensure an adequate supply of food and clothing materials at a price within the purchasing power of the poor. Nobody can deny that inflation is one of the potent causes of rising prices. It is,

therefore, imperative for any government to check inflation while trying for a more liberal supply of the articles of daily use.

The Government of India failed in both. They allowed the matter to drift till inflation made 'the rich richer, and the poor poorer', and among other evils the inevitable 'black market' spread its tentacles to every nook and corner of the country. The Government also failed to realise the serious shortage of every form of 'consumers' goods' and were most reluctant to release the mills and factories for the production articles of every day use. They instead pinned their faith in the theory of hoarding and that of disgorging as the sole remedy. They failed to discover the hoards, where there were none, and also failed to make big stockists and government agencies to disgorge them ( the hoards ) by the threats hurled at hoarders and profiteers almost every day. The Government in India are competent to find out an objectionable leaflet placed in the folds of a book or underneath the bedding of a *taktaposh* but failed to find out two-maund-rice bags stacked in godowns in hilly heaps.

To their pet theory of hoarding, the Government of Bengal added their theory of 'falling prices' of foodstuffs. On May 8, the Hon'ble the Finance Minister, Mr. T. C. Goswami, said (at Behala near Calcutta) :

that in a short time the situation will improve.

On May 16, at the foot of the Ochterloney Monument, the Civil Supplies Minister said :

There can be little doubt that rice had gone into hoards. If the hoarders would not disgorge 'he would not refrain from doing his duty and in getting those hoards wherever they were'. He hoped that ere long their efforts in this respect would bear fruit and the prices would come down.

The Finance Minister, the Hon'ble Mr. Tulsi Chandra Goswami,

believed that before long the price would come down. The speculators were in their last grasp and the reason why the prices were not coming down could be assigned

to their last desperate attempt to keep the prices up...He believed that the hard days through which the people were passing on account of the soaring prices would not last more than two or three weeks.

On May 23, 1943, the Premier, the Hon'ble Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin, said at Howrah that

he had no doubt that the prices of foodstuffs would be brought to a reasonable level within a short time.

On June 4, 1943, when rice was selling, according to the Central Government, at Rs. 32 per maund, a Civil Supplies Department Press Note said that "there is every reason to believe that prices have reached their peak". It also said that 'more and more rice is flowing into the Calcutta and mufassil markets' and with the 'unearthing of the hoards' there was 'ground for solid confidence that prices will begin to fall'.

During the Bengal Upper House debate on July 19, 1943, Mr. Suhrawardy, the Civil Supplies Minister, said that "the price of rice has been arrested" and also, "as a result of the drive the prices have been controlled and prevented from rising".

On August 1, he exclaimed :

I wish to take this opportunity of warning the trade that a scheme for controlling prices throughout Bengal will shortly be put in operation... Most vigorous steps will be taken by Government to ensure that these controlled prices are maintained.

It will be evident from the following table, taken from the *Indian Trade Journal*, that all the above statements were untrue ; inasmuch as price rose to Rs. 37 per bazar maund on August 8, 1943. It is needless to say that the actual price was much higher than what has been given in the table.

#### PRICE OF RICE IN CALCUTTA FROM MARCH 26, 1943

On		Rs. As. P.		Rs. As. P.
26.3.43	...	23 0 0	to	24 0 0
2.4.43	...	23 0 0	„	24 0 0
9.4.43	...	22 0 0	„	23 0 0
16.4.43	...	22 0 0	„	23 0 0

PRICE OF RICE IN CALCUTTA  
FROM MARCH 26, 1943

On		Rs.	As.	P.		Rs.	As.	P.
23.4.43	...	22	0	0	to	23	0	0
30.4.43	...	23	0	0	„	24	0	0
7.5.43	...	26	0	0	„	27	0	0
14.5.43	...	30	0	0	„	31	0	0
21.5.43	...	31	0	0	„	32	0	0
28.5.43	...	31	0	0	„	32	0	0
4.6.43	...	32	0	0	„	33	0	0
11.6.43	...	34	0	0		—		
18.6.43	...	32	0	0	„	33	0	0
25.6.43	...	31	0	0	„	32	0	0
2.7.43	...	31	0	0	„	32	0	0
9.7.43	...	32	0	0	„	33	0	0
16.7.43	...	32	0	0	„	33	0	0
23.7.43	...	32	0	0	„	33	0	0
30.7.43	...	33	0	0		—		
6.8.43	...	33	8	0		—		
13.8.43	...	34	8	0		—		
20.8.43	...	37	0	0		—		
27.8.43								
3.9.43	...	36	0	0	„	37	0	0
10.9.43		32	0	0		(nominal—		
to					asking rates, there being hard-			
18.10.43					ly any seller at the controlled			
					rate viz., Rs. 24/-).			
22.10.43	...				No quotation available, the			
					controlled rate being Rs. 20/-			
					per md. since 25-9-43.			
29.10.43	...				—do—			
5.11.43	...				—do—			
12.11.43	...				—do—			
19.11.43	...				—do—			

(According to the "Trade Journal" price given above is for Kalma, mill cleaned, per b. md. In fact the price is for any rice available in the market).

The readers would particularly remember "that the actual increases are supposed to be greater in view of black market ignored in the index".

Rice sold at Rs. 105 per maund at Dacca in the middle of October.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The essential foodstuffs, such as rice, atta, etc., are not available. A gentleman was in a desperate plight for want of rice a few days ago, and could secure with difficulty only a small quantity at Rs. 105 per maund." Rai Bahadur K. C. Banerji, M.L.C., to *Associated Press*, published in Calcutta on October 16, 1943.

On September 11, the *Statesman* wrote :

Rice is still scarce in Calcutta and the difficulty of the public in obtaining supplies from the bazar continues. Yesterday when the Government order fixing the prices for retail sale at Rs. 26 a maund came into force, a *Statesman* reporter who visited some markets, was told by shopkeepers that they had no stocks as they could not secure supplies from the mills. In some places rice could be obtained only in small quantities at controlled rates.

The Bengal Government was satisfied with the scheme for price control by means of sliding scale which was to take effect from August 28, 1943. With the announcement of the scheme "Government decided to buy rice and paddy" wherever available. Mr. Suhrawardy "claimed that the prices had been brought down", and "affirmed that their price policy had not failed". (October 13 and 15, 1943.)

The Director General of Food, Mr. B. R. Sen, said on October 1, 1943 :

The recent scheme of the Bengal Government in regard to the procurement of foodgrains has evidently failed. The scheme was based on the system of a descending scale of prices, *i. e.*, till the middle of August the price fixed was Rs. 10 per maund and then the prices were lowered gradually for every successive week. The expectation was that the hoarded and the new crops reaped would come to the market for quick sale. But the result of the scheme was hardly encouraging ; there was even a wholesale disappearance of rice in certain places.

Whom are we to believe ? The people through their experience of suffering knew that the Director General was speaking the barest truth.

The *Statesman* wrote thus on October 12, 1943, under the caption 'Consequences of Untruth' :

With commendable realism Bengal's energetic Minister of Civil Supplies, Mr. Suhrawardy, last Sunday (10-10-43) described his Province as in the grip of unprecedented famine. He added a well-phrased exhortation to cultivators and traders to release their stocks of foodgrains forthwith for public consumption. This plea he based not only on humanitarian grounds but on the ground that prices are soon bound to fall. We do not know whether he is right in this forecast ; nor, perhaps does he. But



realism necessitates recognition that many will certainly disbelieve him...

Disingenuousness or ill-informed optimism in propaganda seldom in the long run pay ; this can (as recently) have repercussions as disastrous as a boomerang.

Nevertheless all humane folk will fervently hope that those who now choose to disbelieve Mr. Suhrawardy's latest statement will before long find themselves painfully caught by a heavy price-fall, causing them to disgorge the ugly profits being sucked from the miseries of the poor ; and there seems interesting possibilities that this may happen."

Subsequent events proved that the "disbelievers" were right and the "interesting possibilities" never materialised.

One is not sure if irresponsible statements of the Government, contrary to actual facts, helped to lull the other provinces into complacency regarding the seriousness of the situation in Bengal.

The position, as recorded in the index number of prices, were as follows :

INDEX NUMBER OF PRICES  
(Wholesale Prices In Calcutta)  
July 1914=100

	Cereals	Pulses	Sugar	Others Food Articles	Mustard Oil
1942					
Jan.	112	127	157	216	75
Feb.	114	122	164	217	80
Mar.	115	127	177	213	70
April	118	120	198	228	80
May	126	127	200	285	80
June	154	151	210	294	82
July	153	151	220	289	95
Aug.	174	166	215	352	97
Sep.	177	186	261	349	Not av.
Oct.	185	198	231	355	Not av.
Nov.	220	226	261	355	105
Dec.	250	241	231	411	Not av.
1943					
Jan.	260	238	258	434	
Feb.	166	280	260	444	
Mar.	334	309	298	457	148
April	375	307	280	505	189
May	473	374	311	545	197
June	447	365	329	565	192
July	498	393	365	580	207
Aug.	572	449	355	579	239
Sept. (a)	530	450	375	582	273

(a) The fact is that rice is scarcely available in the market in sufficient quantities.—(Author's remarks).

The figures given above relate to cereals, pulses, sugar, mustard oil and other food articles. The prices soared higher and higher in spite of the fact that the Central Government held as many as six conferences with the result that the people began to die of starvation from July 1943 on the streets of Calcutta.

In the face of these facts Mr. Hossain Imam, a stalwart of the Moslem League in the Council of State from Bihar, said on November 23, that "the price of rice had come down ever since the League Ministry had taken office" and they had taken office on April 24, 1943.

But the question of rising prices of foodstuffs was not the only problem with the people of India, particularly of Bengal, where the famine had been taking its toll in millions. The cost of all the necessities of life had increased and the people were practically deprived of every article required for the upkeep of the individual and the family. In each case the cost had increased prohibitively leaving a small or no margin to secure food, clothing, drugs, simple toilet articles, fuel, utensils, agricultural implements, etc. The Government thought that the people with the very low standard of living, that they had been able to develop during the last 200 years of peaceful reign, would bear any amount of strain and would also supply 'volunteers' for the army at the rate of 70,000 per month.

The people were starved in all possible ways. It was when the massacre had overtaken the land that the Government began thinking of importing 'toilet goods, razor blades, whisky and drugs'. They also tried "to make a greater release of certain types of steel, such as usable defectives, through provincial and trade channels, at controlled prices, to expand manufacture in small-scale industries of agricultural implements, such as small tools, nails, shoes for bullocks, cart tyres, etc". On December 28, 1943, they decided to release a small quantity of brass sheets for the manufacture of household utensils !

The whole nation was forced to buy things at a rate 600% or more above the ordinary rates, when the bulk of the population, consisting of the landless peasantry and persons uncon-

nected with the war services or war contracts had absolutely no means of earning any extra income.

During all these years India could have produced her requirements while helping the war effort. She would have been, under cover of import regulation and circumstances caused by the war, able to establish her own industries and defy competition of imported goods when conditions will have been returning to normal. Valuable opportunities have been allowed to waste by controlling power, raw materials of every kind, tools and implements, machinery and what not for the prevention of the growth of new industries in the country. The British policy was enunciated by the Hon'ble Sir Jeremy Raisman, Finance Member to the Government of India, on March 4, 1942, in the following terms :

The paramount need of the moment is to gear the industrial potential of this country to the war effort ; and I should have thought that the setting up of other industries, although possible without diversion of machinery or man-power or skill, would tend, if anything, to obstruct the maximum war effort.

This policy has done incalculable harm to the interests of the people of India. It was wrong to assume that during the long period of war, Indians would be able to subsist on the products of the war industries alone. The small industries scattered in villages and partly dependent on the large factories for materials to work upon could not find a regular supply of these articles and had to stop work. While some persons became rich in no time by industry and labour connected with the war, others became poor and poorer by the loss of their means of livelihood.

The Government looked on during the first stages of this trouble complacently and subsequently, helplessly at the rising prices. The suffering public sold away everything they had and very soon came to the end of their tether. Yet Government would oppose any mention of 'inflationary tendencies' in the market.

On this the *Statesman* commented on October 12, 1943, in the following terms :

...the New Delhi authorities last cold weather con-

tended that there was virtually no inflation, though they have since admitted to having had knowledge during the later part of that period of dangerously inflationary tendencies.

The remarks of the *Statesman* on the Government's "disgraceful tradition of false and ignorant prophecy" on falling prices, non-existence of food shortage in India and Bengal during the last few months (before October, 1943) and 'no inflation' theory mentioned above, were that :

No Government system which has travestied truth on economic subjects can reasonably expect to retain full confidence.

The loss of confidence in the Government must have played a great part in intensifying the fear of danger in the public mind.

In England ceiling prices were fixed long before the people had begun to feel the pinch of increasing prices and "to bridge the gap between the ceilings and the cost either of imported goods or home farm products, subsidies are paid in respect of many leading foods", the result "being that since April 1941, the official cost-of-living index has remained practically stationary at not quite 30 per cent. above its pre-war level". This was done in a country where the people are rich and can well look after themselves. In India, said Mr. Pethick Lawrence, on November 4, in the Parliament,

large number of people in certain provinces had not got the purchasing power to pay for such foodstuffs as would keep them alive. The main cause of this increase in price was inflation. For that inflation Government of India and nobody else could be responsible.

Mr. Amery was forced to admit that "the problem would not be nearly as serious as it is today" if the people were not impoverished by an all-round enhancement of price of all goods that they required.

On October 20, Lord Huntingdon said :

With increasing prices the terrible poverty of the Indian peasant left a very small margin between subsistence and starvation.

The anti-inflationary measures adopted by the Government at a very late stage were not at all successful in checking the rising prices of goods. The people, who could not purchase the necessities of life either due to extremely high prices charged for them or for want of their supply in the market, concentrated on buying foodstuffs that would save them from starvation if needs be and bring a good return if sold out.<sup>1</sup>

This was the crux of the whole situation. If prices had been controlled in time, and the Government tried to supply the market with the common "consumer goods", the tragedy would have been partly avoided. A large part of the rural population that succumbed to the after-effects of the famine due to devaluation might have been saved from an untimely death.

1 Sir Tracy Gavin Jones, President, Upper India Chamber of Commerce, quoting Sir Digby Drake-Brockman on March 6, 1943, said :

"The villager is commodity-minded, not money, or shall I say currency-minded. In good times he puts his surplus or profit into goods (gold and silver) and currency. I remember in the last war, when prices soared, with his surplus or profit, he bought and held large quantities of gold and silver, including silver rupees, which eventually came into the market again during the catastrophic slump of 1921-32. To-day no gold and silver is available and the rupee is worth intrinsically about two annas so the villager, having no confidence in the security-edge rupee, and being unable to buy gold and silver with it, prefers to hold and store a certain portion of his grain, especially wheat, commodities which he knows always have a market value and in which he has confidence."

## LARGE-SCALE PURCHASES

THE famine of 1943 bears a close resemblance to that of 1770 in that in both the famines the first concern of the Government was to lay up a huge store for future emergency. The markets became extremely panicky and the result was disastrous. In 1942, the Hon'ble the Commerce Member, Mr. Nalini Ranjan Sarker, said on September 7 :

*Large scale purchases are made on behalf of the Army for the increasing requirements of our Defence Forces. We have also to meet certain demands in respect of our neighbouring countries like Ceylon whose stability is vital to the defence of the country.*

And again,

*Provincial and State Governments have to build up strategic reserves as a safeguard against emergency condition.* (All italics mine.)

There is evidence of further 'large-scale' purchases by very big concerns, the Railways, the Port Trust, big factories employing huge labour forces for manufacturing essential war materials. And smaller factories connected with the war, following in the footsteps of the 'big brothers' hoarded huge stocks.

Big business houses, with large profits derived from war supplies, entered the field, and added to their various other activities, the trade in grains in Bengal. They were sure of a decent margin provided they could simply 'hold on' for a few days and months. Extensive purchases on behalf of the Government of Bengal were made, more from the market than from the growers, and grains worth Rs. 42 crores were acquired while advances totalling Rs. 15 crores remained unbalanced at the end of 1943-44. A large quantity was bought at places outside, but the province itself was not spared and the major portion of the *Aus* crop of 1943 was practically 'commandeered'.

In the Central Assembly debates, Sir Edward Benthall, the Transport Member, said, in November :

We have adopted deliberately a policy of cheap food, and of thereby stabilising the cost of living of railwaymen. We are pledged to fulfil our undertaking, and have done so without hoarding. The monthly returns of the Railways between April and October show that over that period the Railways based on Calcutta—the E. I. R., the B. & A., the B. N. R. *held an average stocks of rice for 42 days*. Mr. Kirby, the rationing expert has laid it down and it is accepted by Government that a thirty days' stock is a reasonable figure for any large concern which had undertaken to feed its staff ... You cannot expect the railwaymen to work without food ; you cannot expect your food to be transported without feeding your railwaymen... The Railways have bought at controlled prices,—not above controlled prices in the market.

Then Sir Henry Richardson speaking as a representative of big European industrial concerns, in the Central Assembly on November 18, 1943, "would not blush if the worst charge against the capitalists was that they had made certain that their labour force would be fed". One might ask what was the number of the 'labour force' and what was the quantity secured all at once.

Considering the far-flung organisation of the railways and the number of men they employ, it is difficult for ordinary men to assess the total quantity of foodgrains withdrawn from the market so as to create a stock for 42 days ; and there is no knowing whether the stock was just for 42 days or more in view of the fact that statistics given by the Government are always undependable. And why was it more than 30 days' stock which the Rationing Expert had recommended ?

These 'large-scale' purchases produced a most baneful effect on the market. People with big or bulging purses began to vie with one another in getting as much supplies as possible for themselves. Prices rocketed upwards till almost no rice was available in the market for any price. There was no attempt at keeping the market going by bringing in imports from foreign countries, although scanty supplies were coming from the provinces at irregular intervals.

Here, as in many other instances, Government failed to

assess the result of such large-scale buying by the 'Capitalists' till December 14, when a Press Note was issued to the following effect :

In accordance with the policy...announced ..regarding the Bengal Food Plan, 1944, the Government of Bengal are now issuing an order prohibiting an employer or an association of employers jointly employing 1,000 or more workers for making purchases of rice or paddy for their employees in the open market.

...Such employers shall, in future, obtain their requirements only through the Government chief purchasing agents.

The reasons given for such restrictions were :

The intention of this order is to prevent big employers of labour from dislocating supplies and upsetting prices by directly entering the market to make large-scale purchases of the above commodities.

It would have been proper for the Government to foresee the results of large-scale purchases when the markets had been receiving a diminishing supply and to prevent stocks accumulating in a few business centres. The Press Note of December 14, ought to have been issued in April or May 1943, when it had not been too late to check the evil effects of big purchases.



## THE DENIAL POLICY

THE Boat Denial and the Rice Removal Policies of the Government were the most indiscreet steps in the conduct of the whole war. They were alarmist steps that exposed the nervousness of the military experts shaking, as their result, the confidence of the whole population.

Explaining the principle of the Denial Policy, Sir John Herbert, the then Governor of Bengal, said in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on April 2, 1942 :

There is no intention on the part of the Government to burn villages, or to remove stocks of grain from villagers' houses. Should, however, in the case of an invasion surplus stocks fall into the hands of the enemies, it has been decided to take measures to remove surplus stocks of grain from the districts concerned, but it is not intended to remove any paddy or other food-grains, which are needed for the normal requirements of the people.

The other form of denial of facilities to the enemy that is intended in the districts is to prevent any means of transport from falling into his hands. If it should ever happen that, in view of the military authorities, the invasion of any district in Bengal is imminent all forms of transport, whether by land or water, would have to be removed.

This was followed on the very next day by a Press Note requiring all country boats to register. The following appeared in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on April 3, 1942 :

An order requiring all country boats carrying ten or more persons and all cargo boats to register at the police station within whose jurisdiction the owner or the person in actual charge of the boat ordinarily resides, has been issued by the Government of Bengal.

The order comes into force at once in the districts of Midnapore, Hooghly, Howrah, 24-Perganas, Jessore, Khulna, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Tippera, Dacca, Noakhali and Chittagong.

A Press Note issued in this connection says that cargo boats measuring 25 ft. or more in length, are also

required to obtain a licence from the officer in charge of the police station concerned for plying in the district, or partly within and partly outside the district.

These orders have been issued as a defence measure to collect information regarding the number and whereabouts of country boats so that, if the need should arise, a further order may be issued requiring them to withdraw beyond the danger zone.

Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq, the then Premier of Bengal, wrote to His Excellency on August 2, 1942, on the Denial Policy in the following terms :

As regards your personal interference in total disregard of Ministerial responsibilities...the first of all is the case of your mandate to the Joint Secretary, Commerce and Labour Department, in April last in the matter of rice removal policy....You gave him orders to take up the work of removal at once, without caring to find out the exact position regarding the excess of rice and paddy in different areas and the best means of removal and the cheapest method of carrying out the scheme. ...At the present moment we are faced with a rice famine in Bengal mainly in consequence of an uncalled for interference on your part, and of hasty action on the part of the Joint Secretary.

Then I come to the boat removal policy. ...The most outstanding instance of blunder which has been committed by the permanent officials, apparently with your knowledge and concurrence, has been the case of the prevention of boats from going out into the Bay of Bengal for the purpose of cultivation of the lands in the various islands lying at the mouth of the Delta.

Besides interfering with "cultivation of char lands, with the movement of commodities and also with deep sea fishing" it caused immense hardships to the people dependent on these boats.

The Order was issued on April 3, 1942 and in the course of a few days no less than 25,000 boats were removed from circulation. (Sir J. P. Srivastava, the Food Member in the Central Assembly on November 18, 1943).

In reply to a question in the Central Assembly, the War Secretary said on March 31, 1944, that "approximately Rs. 82 lakhs were paid as compensation in Bengal". But a lump-

sum paid to a poor man is no substitute for the instrument which earns for him his daily bread. Such money is soon spent on the necessities of life, of which he is in constant want, and, there is nothing left to buy food when required.

On the basis of five persons depending on the earning derived from a boat, the Order immediately threw out 125,000 persons into a state of panic and penury. The affected people roamed about spreading consternation everywhere and the atmosphere around became forthwith surcharged with suspicion and alarm.

The Government discovered its own error very soon because not only the fishing trade suffered but also the char lands could not be cultivated nor could foodgrains be moved from place to place for want of transport. On January 9, 1944, it was announced that 'military effort is now being concentrated on reconditioning country boats'. It was known on March 31, that 'the release of all boats taken over has been agreed to with the exception of those required for military use' and the 'Bengal Government have agreed to build 5,000 new boats now and 5,000 later....' To destroy boats first and to rebuild them afterwards when disaster had overtaken the people, is a form of waste for which there can hardly be any justification.

The removal of rice without making sufficient and satisfactory arrangements for the people who were to depend on the quantity removed was another serious blunder. As regards the quantity removed there is something wrong in the computation as the statement on May 13, 1943, of the then Food Secretary, Major-General Wood, putting it at 30,000 tons, did not tally with the figure given in the Foodgrains Policy Committee Report at page 2, viz., 40,000 tons.<sup>1</sup>

1 Report of the Foodgrains Policy Committee, 1943, p. 2 : "The entry of Japan into the war, brought with it a series of consequences which, in conjunction with other factors, have gravely complicated the food situation.

(i) . . . . .

(ii) The fear that India might be invaded no doubt directly affected the public mind, as did the air-raids upon Calcutta. Both potential invasion and actual air-raids increased the apprehension that communications might

The Policy adopted to deny easy means of transport and food to the enemy, in case of an invasion, taken individually, was not sufficient to cause a famine, but together with other causes it caused serious inroads on the resources of the Government. It is all the more deplorable that this step was taken without weighing the actual implication of the order or making any provision for taking care of those who had been silently working for their own livelihood and the welfare of the society but suddenly found themselves placed in a predicament for which they were ill-prepared.<sup>1</sup> Further, subsequent events proved that such a step was not at all necessary and it was giving undue weight to the strength of the enemy. Such military miscalculations might have contributed to the disaster in the Far East and considerable difficulties to the people of the localities concerned.

be seriously interfered with and led, no doubt, to a certain accumulation of stocks upon private account.

(iii) The same military situation forced upon the Military Authorities the necessity of taking *a series of measures which also affected the public mind*. It became necessary to *practise* a 'denial policy', that is, to remove certain stocks, in case they should fall into the enemy hands. The amounts involved...actually amounted to no more than 40,000 tons—and though they were not in any way destroyed, *they did affect the public mind in Bengal* which was also adversely influenced by the denial policy in connexion with river craft, purchases which were unduly magnified—in connexion with the army and with the supply of foodstuffs to contractors' labour." (Italics mine.)

1 "Boats and boatmen are worth protecting, for they do their work in the face of every difficulty, and never ask for any consideration. We say in Egypt that the only men whom the first Viceroy Mahamat Ali never subjugated were the boatmen."—Sir William Willcocks, K. C. M. G., *loc. cit.*, p. 21.

## A CUMULATIVE EFFECT

BENGAL is a deficit province with regard to her food supply and any additional cause, otherwise negligible, brings about famine conditions in the Province. In fact, the people of the rural areas are half fed,<sup>1</sup> verging on starvation and are always susceptible to malaria and other endemic diseases. It has been truly said that 'malaria is an euphemism for insufficient food, scanty clothing and insanitary dwellings'. We have other causes too, epidemic in nature, of the high death-rate among the people of Bengal, such as cholera, small-pox, dysentery, respiratory and other preventible maladies. They take a huge toll simply because the people have very low power of resistance due to insufficient nutrition derived from unwholesome and scanty food.

Add to this occasional visitations of famine with all its horror. One may ask, what are the causes of repeated famines in India. The one simple answer is the chronic poverty of the people. Then comes the question what is this poverty of the entire people due to? The explanations that are generally advanced by the Government are that

- (i) The population increased very rapidly in Bengal (and India);
- (ii) The Indian cultivators are careless and improvident;
- (iii) The money-lender is the bane of India; and
- (iv) In a country where the people depended almost entirely on their crops, they must starve when the crops failed in years of drought.

1 "The peasantry of Bengal, says an official report of the Director of Public Health, are in large proportion taking to a dietary on which *even the rats could not live for more than a few weeks.*

In 1933, the Director of Indian Medical Service, Major-General Sir John Megaw, estimated that 39 per cent. of the Indian people were well nourished, 41 per cent. poorly nourished, and 20 per cent. very poorly nourished. *At least 80 million people of India were perpetually hungry.* He reported further that disease is widely disseminated throughout India and is increasing steadily and rather rapidly."— Sir Purushotamdas Thakurdas in a statement to the *Associated Press* on October 7, 1943, at Simla.

In answer to such explanations, R. C. Dutt<sup>1</sup> says that 'the population of Bengal (India) never increased at the rate of England', (ii) 'it is known that there is not a more abstemious, a more thrifty, and more frugal race of peasantry on earth'. As regards the money-lenders' influence on the economic life of the peasantry and keeping them 'in a chronic state of indebtedness', he says that 'the cultivators are forced under the thralldom of money-lenders by the rigidity of the Government revenue demand'. Since the above passage was written, the rural indebtedness has been liquidated to a certain extent by the 'Agricultural Debtors' Act', 'Money-Lenders' Act', etc., and long before that the land revenue system was stabilised to a certain extent by land legislations of various types. As regards the fourth cause, failure of crops in certain areas, it may be said that crops never failed in a manner that might cause havoc to millions of the population. In this connection we must think of the railways, which have been expanded at a huge sacrifice of the tax-payer's money and should be utilised to meet the deficit from other surplus areas in times of need.

The causes mentioned above have been termed 'superficial explanations' of Indian famine by the late R. C. Dutt and he asks, 'What are the true causes of Indian poverty and Indian famines?' It might be said here that what is true of India is more particularly applicable to conditions in Bengal and it is safe to deal with the causes of 'poverty and famines' in both Bengal and India in a general way. Then what are the true causes? In reply, Dutt puts some counter-questions, such as :

Does agriculture flourish? Are industries and manufactures in a prosperous condition? Are the finances properly administered, so as to bring back to the people an adequate return for the taxes paid by them? Are the sources of national wealth widened by a Government anxious for the material welfare of the people?<sup>2</sup>

In his own language, the reply is :

The economic laws which operate in India are the same as in other countries of the world; the causes which

1 *The Economic History of India (under Early British Rule)*. p. vii.

2 R. C. Dutt, *Ibid.*

lead to wealth among other nations lead to prosperity in India ; the causes which impoverish other nations, impoverish the people of India. Further 'it is, unfortunately a fact...that, in many ways, the sources of *national wealth in India have been narrowed under British Rule*. India in the eighteenth century was a great manufacturing as well as a great agricultural country, and the products of the Indian loom supplied the markets of Asia and Europe. It is, unfortunately, true that the East India Company and the British Parliament,... discouraged Indian manufacturers in the early years of British Rule in order to encourage the rising manufactures of England. Their fixed policy... was to make India subservient to the industries of Great Britain, and make the Indian people grow raw produce only, in order to supply material for the looms and manufactures of Great Britain. *This policy was pursued with unwavering resolution and with fatal success...* (Italics mine.)

Behind the economic causes mentioned above, other factors perhaps more potent and far-reaching than these have reduced Bengal, a 'land overflowing with milk and honey', to a land of abject penury, disease and decay. Eminent people enquiring into the causes of such revolutionary climatic changes in the Province and economic disaster to the people think that an inordinate desire for gain, combined with considerations of military strategy and the attempt to open an outlet for British capital under a 'guaranteed system', in the shape of railways, is the main contributory cause. Then there are high roads and embankments effected without any consideration of the natural courses of rivers and streams, 'mother Nature's own masterful and cunning handiwork', with the result that the country is visited, as many as more than a dozen times during the rains, by devastating floods rendering villages full of marshy swamps and stagnant pools. Dr. Bentley, the then Director of Public Health, Bengal, said about twenty years ago :

The increase of malarial disease that has taken place in many deltaic areas in Bengal is inextricably bound up with a coincident decline of agricultural production owing to diminished natural irrigation and impoverishment of the soil. The common origin of these associated evils is to be sought in the decay of river systems of

the delta tracts, accelerated by the embanking of certain main channels, the mischief being further greatly intensified by the construction of thousands of miles of raised roads and railways.<sup>1</sup>

He further added :

Since the flushing of this country has been prevented, agriculture, health and prosperity have suffered...<sup>2</sup>

Lt.-Col. J. A. Sinton says :

These factors ( measures resulting in an increase of malaria ) have led in India to industrial and agricultural decay, economic stress, abandonment or inhibition of potentially promising enterprises, depopulation of important and potentially rich tracts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

This is all-round starvation and is the root of all evils.

The fertility of the soil has been deleteriously affected by the deprivation of the manure that was carried in the past by the 'rich red water' of the flood regulated by irrigation canals and now almost choked up by silts accumulating in the course of many neglected years. "*The first thing in Bengal is to give plentifully of the rich red water of the flood and so enrich the soil and combat malaria*", said Sir William Willcocks in 1928.<sup>4</sup> (Italics mine.)

We have also the views of Sir Arthur Cotton on irrigation, which has been thoroughly neglected, and is one of the main causes of malaria, poverty and famines (in Bengal). Says Sir Arthur Cotton :

If the careful regulation of water is attended to it answers admirably every requirement of the country, bringing prosperity to the population and revenue to the Government. Its necessary outlay in the cost of works is amply repaid over and over again, not only by the wealth but also the health of the territory where the money is spent.

He was strongly opposed to the expansion of railways in

1 Chas. A. Bentley : *Malaria and Agriculture in Bengal*, p. 65.

2 *Ib'id.*, p. 47.

3 Lt.-Col. J. A. Sinton, D.Sc., I.M.S., in "Man-made Malaria in India", p. 1 (Government of India Health Bulletin).

4 William Willcocks, K.C.M.G. : *The Restoration of the Ancient Irrigation of Bengal*, p. 23.



preference to irrigation. His opinion on railways is remarkable :

Railways do not provide food for man and beast ; do not carry the whole traffic of the country, do not carry it cheaply enough ; do not pay interest on cost and debt ; do not drain the country and do not provide drinking water.

If the mischief is done, it must be the serious attempt of the Government with all its resources to undo it as early as possible. Without seriously tackling the problem of diminishing returns from agriculture, neglect of irrigation and the decaying health of the population it is useless to talk about prevention of famines in Bengal by any other means.

Says Sir William Willcocks :

Open up every irrigation canal of 60 years ago and put decent bridges under the railway... and continue the canals through bhil and land, irrigating and blessing and washing out stagnant pools and filthy marshes.<sup>1</sup>

For the benefit of the people and the Government of India Sir William Willcocks further says :

When reviewing for *Indian Engineering* the work of the Irrigation Commission I noted that the Government of India never identified itself with the people of India, it acted as though it had no duties and no obligations to poverty-stricken people who were often poor owing to the ignorance of the Government itself.<sup>2</sup>

The position of the Government of India, in this respect, "can be compared to the action of the boy who killed his father and mother and then pleaded for special treatment as an orphan". You cannot expect to enrich the people without restoring them to health and you cannot give them health unless you can feed them with what their body wants. In the language of Mr. Whipple :

Poverty and disease mutually influence each other. We cannot expect to solve the problem by attacking either alone. It is most difficult to separate cause from effect.

1 W. Willcocks, *loc. cit.*, p. 19.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

*In fact, there is a third major factor, which we call ignorance, and the three are mutually dependent. (Italics mine.)*

Everybody will agree that under the conditions prevailing in India, famine is but an additional factor contributing to the eventual extinction of the race.

R. C. Dutt dealing with the economic decline of India for political reasons remarks :

Place any other country under the same condition, with crippled industries, with agriculture subject to a heavy and uncertain Land Tax, and with financial arrangements requiring one-half of its revenues to be annually remitted out of the country, and the most prosperous nation on earth will soon know the horrors of famine. A nation prospers if the sources of its wealth are widened, and if the proceeds of taxation are spent among the people, and for the people. A nation is impoverished if the sources of its wealth are narrowed, and the proceeds of taxation are largely remitted out of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. J. Lawrence, C.I.E., Commissioner of Allahabad, asked : "I believe there is very little difference between the poorer classes of the people and semi-starvation ; but what is the remedy ?"

The remedies suggested by Mr. Dutt are :

Retrenchment is the first remedy ;

Promotion of Agricultural Wealth is the second ;

Revival of the National Industries of the people is the third remedy. India never depended on agriculture alone under Hindu and Mahomedan rule ; India cannot prosper on agriculture alone under British rule.<sup>2</sup>

The remedies suggested by Sir Purushotamdas Thakurdas are :

The cumulative effect of the factors ( poor and insufficient diet, disease etc. ) in operation, presumably for decades and more, has now made itself felt to a horrifying extent, and any action in the direction of a long-term policy to remedy the present crisis must take cognisance of this deterioration in the economic condition of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Economic History of India during Early British Rule*, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Dutt, *Ibid.*, pp. 436-7.

masses, as allowed to progress and accentuate itself during the last few decades.<sup>1</sup>

We may add as corollaries : Reduction in the cost of administration, improvement in the health of the people and of the food for man and cattle are other remedies requiring immediate attention. "Anaemic plants and anaemic men go together." Improve the condition of both by proper flushing of the country. Due to agricultural decline and of 'anaemic fodder', and also due to malaria and a general deterioration of the health of the country, the cattle population of Bengal has become so weak that its maintenance has become uneconomic both as plough cattle and as the milch cow.

Further, save India from taking part in your Imperial game with hard cash from the poor man's purse. There is nothing left with us after paying the 'Home Charges' and meeting other forms of direct and indirect drain on the revenue of the land.

With regard to the huge drain on Indian exchequer in recent years says Mr. K. T. Shah<sup>2</sup> :

India has spent untold blood and money in the so-called frontier expeditions, Afghan Wars and other Caesarian ventures forced upon her by the exigencies of British Imperialism. Seldom was a word of protest raised to check,—much less to prevent, such enterprise, far beyond the frontiers of India,—in Egypt, in South Africa, in China or Burma.

With regard to recent contributions in men and money during the World Wars I and II, his words should be known to all lovers of India who seek the cause of Indian famines in quarters away from the real ones. Says he<sup>3</sup>:

We made in the last war a mighty contribution—a million men sent to the Empire's battlefields ; crores spent from our paupers' purse on the War ; and a free gift made, in addition, of Rs. 190 crores to the British Exchequer. In return we got the Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre ; and the Reverse Councils,

1 Sir Purushotamdas Thakurdas in a statement dated Simla, October 7, 1943, to the *Associated Press*.

2 K. T. Shah, *How India Pays for the War*, pp. 15-16.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

which, after strangulating our export trade, cost us a direct treasury loss of some 40 crores. History has already been repeating itself in this war as regards our contribution.

What is our contribution in the present war? It is quite premature to hazard any guess as to the approximate figure at the present stage. It may run into an infinitesimal total of "Indian National Debt" which will be successfully retarding progress of every kind during the next hundred years or so. Answering a question of Raja Yuvaraj Dutt Sing, in the Council of State, Mr. C. E. Jones, Secretary, Finance Department, said on February 21, 1944 :

Out of the total expenditure incurred by India on defence and supply services during the five years 1939-40 to 1943-44, *the amount charged finally to Indian revenues under terms of the financial settlement is now expected to be Rs. 800,00,00,000 (eight hundred crores)...* The original estimate of the total capital outlay was Rs. 55,77,00,000. Of this India was liable for Rs. 11,44,00,000. (Italics mine.)

What a paltry difference in the estimate of India's contribution towards 'defence and supply services' in the present war? From Rs 11.44 crores to Rs. 800 crores and the war may go on for another five, ten or more years !

Bound to submit to such exploitation without getting any benefit in return, India cannot thrive in any sphere, economic, physical, intellectual and even moral. (A hungry man, perhaps except in India, knows no moral law). Again in the words of Mr. Shah<sup>1</sup> :

For though we had made a heavy contribution in men and money and materials in a purely European struggle for the survival of imperialism ; though we were given handsome promises of our national emancipation and autonomy, when the day of reckoning came, a sad disillusionment awaited us. We were denied our dues, if not deceived ; frustrated and obstructed and at every step made to feel the heavy hand of imperialist exploitation.

Occasional famine is only the pronounced expression of

1 K. T. Shah, *loc. cit.*, pp.11-12

continuous scarcity.”<sup>1</sup> This scarcity or famine, whatever it is, may be due to drought, flood, frost, insect pests, etc. “In some cases they are aggravated by an economic system which strips a wide area of necessary reserves or interferes with importation.” In India famine has been defined as “only the exceptional aggravation of a normal misery”.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the causes already mentioned, India has her own problems and these have been enumerated by Frank A. Southard, Jr., as “the agricultural workers, dependent on the produce of their land for sustenance, have almost no reserve and are prostrated in the event of crop failure. *Heavy taxes, inadequate agricultural methods, the burden of a caste system containing large numbers of unproductive people, and the British drain upon Indian resources have been offered as explanations of Indian poverty*”.<sup>3</sup> (Italics mine.)

With this background one should try to find out the causes of each individual case of famine that has visited the land during the British rule in India from 1770 to 1943.

The causes that have led to the disaster of 1943 have been stated separately by the Secretary of State, Mr. Amery, Mr. Subrawardy, the Civil Supplies Minister, Bengal and Mr. B. R. Sen, Director-General of Food, Government of India. They are the chief defenders of the Government while a brilliant galaxy of Members of the Government of India and Ministers of the Provincial Governments have advanced causes that are more or less akin to one another. These are rather explanations for individual conduct chiefly to exonerate oneself and to “shroud himself in a white sheet of innocence”.

Overconfidence in the stock of the country was one of the most potent causes of this famine. Mr. Amery started with the theory (July 1, 1943) that “there is no overall shortage”. As regards the immediate causes he said (July 14),

1 Sir E. C. Buck, Kt., C.S.I., Secretary to the Government of India, in the *Statistical Atlas of India* (1895), p. 21.

2 *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. VI, p. 162 (Disasters and Disaster Relief).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

that the present difficult food situation in India was due to widespread tendency of cultivators to withhold food-grains from the market, to larger consumption per head as a result of increased family income<sup>1</sup>, to hoarding by consumers and others and in many parts in India to the fact that methods whereby surplus supplies of food-grains had in normal times moved from areas of production to areas of consumption had ceased to function or been seriously weakened.

With weakened confidence in the Government's capacity to feed the people in case of need all the factors mentioned above are but its natural outcome. But it is not true that there was any large stock in the hands of the cultivators who are proverbially poor and must have sold out all they had with the first indication of rising prices and subsequently died of starvation when foodgrains completely disappeared from the market. With stocks with them there could not have been such widespread misery in Bengal as was the case.

It is not only ludicrous but also cruel to suggest that where people cannot have sufficient food when rice sells at Rs. 2-4 to Rs. 4-8 per maund, there was 'larger consumption per head' when rice was selling at Rs. 20 per maund or over and where the mass of the people were not very greatly benefited "as a result of increased family income" which came in the way of persons connected with the War.

There was "increased consumption" in certain quarters for which the Government were responsible. They should have anticipated this contingency and made timely arrangements for meeting the extra demand on the food resources of the country. Writes Rev. H. C. Long in *The National Call*<sup>2</sup>:

Even though all supplies for foreign troops were imported, the induction of hundreds of thousands of young Indians into the army must have contributed to the food shortage ; for ordinarily they would have been on semi-starvation rations for several months each year in their own villages, but to keep them fit for the strenuous life of the army they must be fed well and regularly. The loss of Burma cut off a great food

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1 See Appendix 'E'.

2 Quoted in *The Modern Review*, March 1944, p. 233.

reservoir on which various provinces of India used to draw if anything happened to local crops. Then, too, the shifting of coolie labour to places where construction projects were under way for the war effort, and the high wages paid ( for they too must eat well ), all tended to draw out the all too meagre food reserves of the country districts.

Besides, Mr. Amery failed to take notice of the high prices demanded for the necessities of life for which the people had to sell everything and be thrown into the streets.

The Hon'ble Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, the Bengal Civil Supplies Minister, gave a long list of causes of the famine on September 15, 1943 in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Briefly stated, they were :

(a) NATURAL CAUSES :

(i) Failure of the Aus crop of 1942 ; (ii) Failure of Aman crop of 1942-43 ; (iii) Havoc caused by cyclone and floods in Midnapore and 24-Parganas ; (iv) Havoc created by crop pests.

(b) MILITARY CAUSES :

(i) Boat Denial policy interfering with cultivation in the char areas, with the movement of commodities and also with deep-sea fishing ; (ii) Evacuation of coastal areas throwing a considerable amount of land out of cultivation and also throwing a large portion of the population on other areas which had barely enough for their subsistence ; (iii) Refugees from Burma and Arakan ; (iv) Tremendous increase of industrial activities and an influx of industrial labour ; (v) Loss of import from Burma ; (vi) Construction of aerodrome putting out of cultivation some lands, diverting labour from the fields and producing another consuming non-productive population ; (vii) Influx of the military ; (viii) Shortage of normal imports from other provinces.

A perusal of the catalogue of causes gives the impression that they spread over a long period and should have been met in time. It is a matter of deep regret that the Government did not take proper steps to allay the distress caused by military reasons when they took the entire responsibility of declaring war against the will of the people.

With regard to the cyclone of October 16, 1942, writes Rev. Long in the same article :

The story of the devastation wrought is too wellknown to need repeating. Obviously the almost universal destruction of crops within that area would produce a very acute food shortage. But the question will be asked : How could the destruction of most of the food of two sub-divisions with a population of only a million and a quarter, or about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent of the total population of Bengal, contribute much to the general famine conditions ? We shall refer to that again shortly.

His remarks on 'havoc created by crop pests' are also very interesting. The Government of Bengal never took the trouble of ascertaining the total loss of crop on this account and took no steps to meet the emergency earlier :

We have connections with 150 teachers scattered over an area in this district, occupied by more than a million people ; and almost all reports from them indicated extensive crop failure due to fungus or insects. Other information was that the blight extended from Burdwan on the north to south of Balasore, Orissa ( about 200 miles ), and from the western border of this district to Ghatal ( 50 miles ). The manager of a big zemindary company in this area said that he thought the crop to be "about three annas to the rupee". Letters in January, 1943, from such widely separated places as Dinajpur and Mymensingh told of a partial crop failure in their vicinities. The district agricultural officer expressed the opinion that pests had seriously affected the crops in many areas of Bengal.

In this famine, the Central Government, more than anybody else, must own its share of responsibility. They were the sole competent authority in matters relating to price-control, restriction on movements of vehicles, inflation, transport, export and import policy, customs and tariff, military purchases, political and social security, etc. The Denial Policy and the Boat Control Order are the outcomes of Central Government Commands. One knows, on the authority of Mr. Hosain Imam, M. L. C. (Central)<sup>1</sup>, that the Bengal Government Ministers were forced to announce that there was no cause of alarm,—their being a

1 Council of State Proceedings, November 19, 1943.



sufficiency of foodgrains in the Province,—under the direction of the Food Department.

This famine has been declared to be “quite fundamentally different in character from any famine anywhere at any time in British history in the past” (B. R. Sen).<sup>1</sup>

It is true ; because nowhere has anybody ever seen war efforts progressing in full swing without any arrangements being made for food for the civil population. It was really a military strategy of a high order to move military supplies without leaving any room for carrying ration. Why is any government machinery—the costliest institution in the world for the poorest people on the face of the earth,—necessary if nature and chance can work with a method for the feeding of the people and the successful termination of the war ?

With the background of ruined industries, declining health and agriculture, extravagant and costly government, mounting ignorance, causes much lighter than war might have caused the famine of 1943. To add to the general confusion, the “Executive Councillors, Ministers, permanent Secretaries and so forth, with more concern apparently for their reputations and prospects than for the public weal, all striving to pass from one to another responsibility” have contributed, “through complacency and misjudgment, greed and myopia” to what has “now become an obvious all-India catastrophe”. “This sickening catastrophe is man-made”, wrote the *Statesman* on September 23, 1943. The previous famines originating primarily from calamities of nature bear but poor resemblance to the present. The local misfortunes such as cyclone in Midnapore, flood in the south-west Bengal, etc., “cannot account for a tithe

1 “To the charge of neglecting the application of the provisions of the Famine Code to the Province, Mr. Sen replied that the Bengal famine with people bereft of confidence, land affected by cyclone, crops destroyed by pests, foodgrains hoarded by traders, all forms of transport completely disorganised as a result of war conditions, and with scarcity of bullocks to drag carts, was a famine “quite fundamentally different in character from any famine anywhere at any time in British history in the past”, and that, therefore, the regulations in the existing Famine Code could bear no application in essential respects.

To this “Commerce” of December 4, 1943, pertinently asks, “If such be the case, one would naturally want to know what the Government did to relieve the situation”.

of the present dreadful sufferings". The *Statesman* pertinently asks : "What the Province's state would now be had drought been added to Governmental bungling?" Certainly it "is an appalling thought". Loss of imports from Burma is a big factor no doubt ; the rapid growth of population and sudden influx of a very large number of men might have caused internal stresses ; but they are just like a drop in the ocean. Moreover they did not happen in a day.

The largest factor has "outstandingly" been "a shameful lack of foresight and planning capacity of India's own civil Governments, Central and Provincial". Goes on the *Statesman* :

We say with deliberation that the present Bengal famine constitutes the worst and most reprehensive administrative breakdown in India since 1930-31. Government, despite its ramshackle structure, has since that date acquired impressive aptitude for handling political troubles... But it has broken down heavily over a primary economic obligation. The fundamental error was made of stumbling half-heartedly into a policy of controlling food and other commodities, while looking yearningly backward towards free trade, without establishing beforehand the executive machinery by which the controls could be enforced. A spate of paper orders poured from Secretariats, signifying in practice little or nothing, and making Government's fair name a laughing-stock. For more than a year there has been not the least evidence of the authorities having any grip on the war-threatened Eastern Provinces' accelerating food-shortage and soaring prices. Each ugly step towards the actuality of famine has found them staggering along several moves in the rear.

The real responsibility lies with the Secretary of State for India to the British Government. He controls the destiny of the people from a distance of 7,000 miles from the seat of occurrence having absolutely no touch with the actual events. The whole Indian administration, down to the lowest system, carry out the policy dictated by the British Government without the least power to amend or alter any part of it except with the consent of the Secretary of State.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In his Minute on the Orissa famine, Lord Lawrence wrote in 1869 : "It seems to me beyond all doubt that there was want of foresight, percep-

This famine has been "brought about according to plan" said Dr. Deshmukh in the Central Assembly on December 17, 1943. In the same session, on the previous day, Mr. K. C. Neogy "could not help thinking that this famine was primarily a state industry and in certain of its aspects bore the hallmark of genuine British manufacture".<sup>1</sup> In the Council of State on November 20, 1943, Mr. V. V. Kaliker said that "neither the Bengal Government, nor the Secretary of State for India, nor the Government of India detected famine in Bengal in proper time to avert the tragedy. It was an administrative scandal of the first magnitude".

There were very large stores of grain in the hands of the military and big employers and there was profiteering both by the Central and the Provincial Governments. There was also profiteering by certain big traders which the Government could not stop. There was complete disregard of the ominous signs of coming events. Over-estimate of the power of Government to find out surplus rice from the hoarders, wastage by the military,<sup>2</sup> general rise in prices of all articles, or in other words, serious inflation, export and various other causes not mentioned by the Government, contributed each in its own way to the disaster of 1943. Each of these causes, if tackled in its proper place and in proper time, might have been kept within

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tion, and precaution regarding the impending calamity...The members of the Board (of Revenue) at the outset set their faces against the wish of the officers of the districts to go about and to ascertain the real state of things, and the actual outturn of the harvest, under the delusion that inquiry was useless, and even pernicious, unless followed by remission of revenue, which they had determined not to grant or recommend." On this Mr. Pritchard commented thus in his "Administration of India": "This (minute of the Governor-General of India) must be regarded, however, at best, as but a poor attempt to shuffle off the responsibility. The Supreme Government were neither deaf nor blind nor dumb. If a 'terrible calamity' was impending and the Local Government were taking no effective measures to meet it, were the Supreme Government tied hand and foot that they could not remonstrate it?" (From the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 1943).

1 See Appendix 'D'.

2 Sir Frederick James, of the European Group, said on November 16, 1943, in the Central Assembly that there was a good deal of waste in military circles. He knew of a case in which a distinguished scientist was approached by the authorities of prisoners of a war camp to tell them how to make compost out of surplus bread; that was when people were starving.

proper limits and prevented from assuming the huge proportions it did with the passing of each day.

Subsequent events proved that the disaster could have been averted or at least mitigated to a large extent. With the facilities of transport provided by the military authorities, foodgrains moved more easily and were carried to the areas worst affected. Release of stock held by the military and big concerns at once brought in a considerable quantity of foodgrains for the use of the suffering people. Drugs and invalid food supplied by the military authorities met one of the most crying needs of the hour. Import of grains from outside, which the people of India had been demanding for a long time, was arranged for and the arrival of the first food ship to a port of India was announced on October 16, from New Delhi.

The personal care taken by the Viceroy, Field-Marshal Wavell, helped to quicken the pace of relief measures by the civil authorities and the announcement of taking the control of food supply by the Central Government was another step in the direction of ameliorating the intolerable conditions that prevailed during the period.

These are some amongst the many obstacles that could not be removed without the intervention of the Home and the Central Governments. It is for these reasons that the verdict of history will pronounce them guilty of negligence and dilatoriness. They waited too long on constitutional niceties when they ought to have proceeded with despatch and determination.

The resolution of the Liberal Conference passed at Bombay in December 1943, gives the whole thing in a nut-shell. It runs thus :

The Federation is strongly of opinion that both the Central and Provincial Governments as well as His Majesty's Government are largely responsible for the serious maladministration which has led to the calamity by lack of provision and effective planning and the shortage of food which should have been foreseen and prevented.

## SOCIETY IN PERIL

THE famine of 1943 leaves its deepest and longest scar on human society. While the marks of every other form of injury will disappear with the passage of a few years, it will take many long decades to rehabilitate the social order that has been shaken to the very foundations.

To the Bengali, as it is to every Indian save only a few with peculiar ideas, the village is the quiet haven he would die to return to from the hurry and bustle of the modern city. The lure of city life, artificial to a degree, does not hold him long ; he would make a dash towards the country on all possible occasions, even if it be only for a short while, and renew contact with it whenever he can. When compelled to seek his fortune amidst the artificial surroundings of a modern industrial town, he would, whenever possible, leave his near and dear ones in the country and visit them at regular intervals. Every time he leaves home he takes with him many happy memories of village life that serve to bind him down to his native soil with an indissoluble bond. He would not sever this bond unless forced to do so under very peculiar circumstances. Such emigrants' number is rather few. The large majority of the population has their entire world in the villages, where their forefathers were born and where family deities and traditions have become part of their being ; where a few "paternal acres" or an old craft has served as their source of meagre subsistence.

A hut, perhaps dilapidated with age and for want of repairs, and a small plot around with a tiny pool that scatters disease, are all that hold him in the village. A cluster of such huts or holdings gave birth to village societies that have withstood the tyranny of time and changed very little under the influence of foreign 'civilization'. The village speaks in a voice that has been heard for centuries on end. The villagers have shared their joys and sorrows in common ; they have

quarrelled over trifles and big matters, forgotten and forgiven each others shortcomings and begun life afresh.

All the social ties are there. There is the mother, the centre of humble homes, round whom revolves the whole family world. All other relations are there, each in his or her own place, contributing in his or her own sphere to make the life going in the midst of ignorance, insanitary conditions, ill-health, semi-starvation, insufficient clothing, and a very low standard of living. Parental love, filial piety, brotherly affection, sisterly attachment, neighbourly sympathy and solicitude commingle together to make the home 'sweet'. And this home and the village go to make real Bengal.

What has happened to these homes? The holdings in most cases have changed hands and would yield possession to newcomers.<sup>1</sup> In most cases it would provide ground for undesirable plants and creepers to grow and give shelter to wild animals. There are very few left in these villages, one or two persons amongst a group of five or more families in a state of utter destitution.

The mother is dead. Where is the mother who would undergo any amount of hardship for her children or for the father of the family or for others whom she used to feed from her own scanty daily meals? With the first approach of scarcity she sacrificed herself bit by bit to keep all others in their proper places in the family and the society. There are a few still living who are devoid of health and are too feeble to bear the future generation. There are young widows, woeful figures, helpless in every conceivable way and incapacitated by starvation to work during the rest of their lives. For her, the society must have the greatest concern. Outwardly, the

<sup>1</sup> The *United Press* reported the following from Gaibandha (published on October 22, 1943) :

"An aspect of the appalling rural impoverishment and acute food scarcity obtaining in this sub-division is revealed by the magnitude of land transactions resorted to by the agriculturists. It transpires that under Gaibandha P. S. alone as many as 540 deeds of sale, lease and mortgages were executed during three days from October 17 to 19."

motherly instinct disclosed in its ugliness where the primordial necessity made it appear in its most hideous form. But the real mother never failed her. If she had sold her child, it was more for the welfare of the latter than for the advantages of a few coins to herself. The innermost mother found consolation in the thought that one who could pay for a child, not his own, had also the mind and the capacity to feed the new acquisition. If she had thrown her child before the running train or into the well, it was primarily for the consoling thought that the act will shorten its sufferings. What is she to-day who has lost nearly all her children by death or could not trace the rest who had gone in search of food and have not returned or will probably never come back ? She is the shadow of a mother who had to leave her child stealthily to her fate for fear of being detected and having to pay for the last rites. The mother who had not the strength to weep or sob out of sheer exhaustion, who had not a drop of tear in her shrivelled body to shed for the dead child, whose finer sentiments and feelings have been smothered for want of proper expression, who would prefer death every moment to a miserable helpless existence, will fail to serve the society and to meet its multifarious demands.

Is there any human device to give expression to the feeling of the mother who, "huddled with others in the corner of the hall at the front of the Collector's Court Room at Faridpur, threw out a bundle to those who had been removing the dead body of an old man and cried out, 'Take that also'?"—"It was her dead child" says Sir Jagadish Prasad in describing the incident in a Memorandum handed over to the Premier of Bengal on September 10, 1943.

The *Hindusthan Standard* correspondent reported from Chandpur on October 11, 1943 (published on October 14), that :

A report has reached here from the cooked food distribution centre at Asta-Mahamaya, within P. S. Faridgunj, opened by the Bengal Relief Committee there, that a starving mother with a child in her lap, was taking food distributed at the centre. In the meantime the child died

in her lap. The mother did not stop to take her food and after finishing her meal she left with the dead child.

Here, through the statement of Dr. B. S. Moonjee, issued on November 21, we find the condition of mothers in general during the famine :

I got the shock of my life when I saw mere skeletons covered simply with skins ; some gasping for their last breath in my presence ; mothers hugging their dying and dead children unable, having no strength, to weep or cry ; some practically in delirium, precedent to death a few minutes or a few hours after, crying for a morsel of rice. Some have no clothes except what was supplied by the various relief committees.

It is difficult for the ordinary people to realise the implications of such a great physical and mental distress on the mothers and the effects they are bound to produce on the general well-being of the society.

Where is the child, the corner stone of the social structure, to-day ? He has been the first victim of the famine, as he always is and "famine of all the scourges is cruellest to children" rightly says Dr. Ammende.<sup>1</sup> For the 8 to 10 thousand orphans that are in the custody of the Government of Bengal, more than a million of them must have died without care, without food, without shelter and without drugs.

They have been the most helpless victims in this grim tragedy because of their ignorance. They cannot guess why the stream of nectar that has been flowing from the perennial source gradually dries up and fails to satisfy his modest needs with pangs of hunger increasing in him. He wonders why the mother that caressed him only a short while before, pressed him closer to her with feeble hands, protected him from the inclement surroundings, fails to do so now. He has slept just a while forgetting all the troubles and the mother's hands, so far as he could remember, travelled slowly with the tendermost touch over his body. He wonders why the same mother does not respond to his thousand and one caresses, to his weak and whispering calls and entreties applied to bring her to senses.

1 Dr. Edward Ammende—*Human Life in Russia*, p. 63.



He lies in bewilderment why she has left him sneezing and coughing, purging and vomiting, on the street pavements, without food and shelter and none to look after him. He loses consciousness even without the knowledge that the growing stupour would give him respite for ever from hunger, from shiver brought about by the July and August rains, and cold and cramps of September and October nights.

What would be the condition of the babies described by Mrs. Vijayluxmi Pandit in a 'communication' to Members of the Standing Committee of All-India Women's Conference at Nainital on October 28.

It runs thus :

Haggard half-naked women worn out for lack of food carrying rickety babies with dried up limbs and old wrinkled faces ; small children with bloated bellies and ribs standing out taut against their lean thin legs which can hardly support their weights

were seen at the relief centres of Bengal. Most of these died much to the relief of the sufferers themselves and also to those who were placed in charge of them.

This is the problem with which the society is faced for depletion of the two most important units. They are dead, but the problem of the living is more acute. Wrote the *Statesman* on August 13, 1943 :

Food may keep alive. But a little food from time to time will not preserve family life, on which social health rests. Food kitchens alone however have little power to keep families and homes together. Where are the parents of the children to be seen sleeping in doorways and behind baffle walls in Calcutta, children of 6, 7 and 8 ? Can we believe that their parents will find them again and take them back to where they come from ? There is a further great evil, about which men have spoken cautiously in public. Many young people, homeless and friendless, have disappeared, probably sucked or dragged into the vice of a large city. How in their misery can they resist those who would profit by them. What refuge and resource have they ? Number of them will never see their village again, and those who do will probably not be useful and welcome members of it ; misery and the town will have robbed even

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the best of them of their village ways and made them aliens and outcasts.

In a caste-ridden Hindu society the problem is greater than anywhere else. The orthodox and the conservative part of it will not receive those well who are orphans of chance and cannot say much about their birth and social position. It would be a tragedy of the first magnitude if they are not allowed to grow normally like others having home and parents and relatives to look after them. What would be the future society if all women who have by force of circumstances had to take to a life, which the society has learnt to treat with shame and suspicion ? Their number is legion ; they are everywhere ; you cannot ignore them. Given the chance and a better treatment, they in the fulness of time, may help in the rebuilding of the society faster than one can imagine.

What is the effect of this famine on the fathers, the brothers and other grown-up male members, of the society ? Millions have died ; there are millions who have survived and are unfit for hard work during the rest of their lives. They form the backbone not only of the social structure, but round them hovers the economic life of the village. The fisherman, the weaver, the potter, brazier, smith, carpenter—in fact the whole artizan class—have been incapacitated to do their bit by death or disease. If famine has crippled the social life of the people, with them has gone the economic life into shreds and tatters.

Famine has brought pestilence in its wake in the shape of malaria, cholera, dysentery, small-pox and a host of other evils. These are more welcome as they bring speedy relief from the torments of a protracted starvation. Whole families have been wiped out and as a result the whole village society is at the threshold of extermination. The peril is imminent and the society is on its trial. Unless the State extends the hands of assistance and alliance, it would be quite impossible to rebuild it within a reasonable span of time.

The famine incidents having their repercussions on society are a legion and only a small portion of them have been reported in the newspapers. Everyman in his own village surround-

dings remembers with grief and sorrow the occurrence of a number of cases that have hit the society very hard and deep. A few of them has been mentioned here for the help of the future historian who will, away from the present shackles of laws and ordinances, be able to write more freely and paint the picture in its true colours.

In August reports of sale of children in the famine and flood-stricken areas of Burdwan and Nadia became known to the public. At Khulna, a woman sold her daughter for Rs. 15 only on October 20, 1943. The father of the girl had left the family in quest of food and never returned. A girl of only three months was offered for sale for Rs. 5 at Burdwan at the end of October, but was prevented from being sold by local people. On November 15, 1943, reports of destitute mothers selling their children or abandoning them on the road-side, husbands deserting their ailing wives were received from Dacca. Rev. Mother Superior Aimee and Sister Dolores of the St. Francis Xavier's Convent of Dacca reported on the same date that many destitute mothers had come to their Convent and offered their babies for sale at a price of Rs. 4 or Rs. 5. One such mother had confessed to her that within a few days after their refusal to buy her baby she had been able to sell her elsewhere. Apart from this, many a morning they had found babies abandoned before the very gate of their Convent.

The report further says that :

One night at about ten when she along with two other Sisters were returning to the Convent after the days relief work through Islampur, a gentleman accosted them and asked if they would care to see a pitiable sight close at hand. On their agreeing, the gentleman escorted them through lanes and by-lanes to an abandoned stable on the river side. There to their utter horror, they found about twenty babies laid in rows on the dark and unclean floor of the stable. Some of the babies were crying in agony for food, some gasping for breath and the rest in a state of utter exhaustion and stupour. On enquiry they learnt that the mothers of the babies, no longer able to carry them on their arms in their trek through the city in search of food, had left their dear little ones behind hoping to return after the day's wanderings to their babies with food for them. Very

often, however, their hopes turn into despair. It was ten o'clock then and nobody could say how many of them returned with food and how many of the babies expired meanwhile.—*Hindusthan Standard* Staff Reporter.

In normal times such cases would be unthinkable but the following are some typical instances that occurred almost everywhere, during the concluding months of 1943.

The *United Press* reported from Tamluk, on September 4, 1943, an incident of a rather unusual nature :

Piqued at being scolded by Sheikh Temij, her husband, Banu Bibi, a woman of village Chak Sijbedya in Sutahata P. S. struck the former with a *Tangi* and caused his instantaneous death. It is reported both Temij and Banu Bibi had been starving for some days and on the 20th August they began to quarrel, when Temij severely scolded his wife whereupon the latter grew furious and gave him a deadly blow.

The report further says that "she is reported to have confessed her guilt". The society and the state must brand the act with the appellation of 'guilt', 'crime' and to the religiously minded it would be known as 'sin', but would they like to take into account the circumstances and the provocation that led her to act in this fashion ?

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published on September 30, 1943, a report from its Malda correspondent dated September 26, from whom we know that :

One Bhogurdi Mandal of Laharpur, P. S. Nawabgunj, Malda, was charged under Sec. 302 I.P.C. for murdering his only son Mozaffar, aged about three years on September 16 on the ground of his inability to feed him and other members of the family who, it is reported, had no food for 3 or 4 days. The accused was tried by the District and Sessions Judge, Malda, and was found guilty by the jurors. He was sentenced to transportation for life but having regard to the tragic circumstances of the case the Judge recommended to the Government to exercise their prerogative of mercy.

A report from Adamdighi (Bogra) published in the *Hindusthan Standard* on October 19, 1943, narrated a woeful tale. The correspondent said that :

The dead body of a Muslim boy was found floating in a ditch near the Adamdighi railway station. It is reported that the deceased along with his brother was coming towards Adamdighi to get 'Prasad' from the local 'Puja Baris'. In the midday the younger brother, who was staggering fell down unconscious. Seeing him on the verge of death the elder brother, to get rid of him pushed him into the ditch and then hastened to the 'Puja Bari' and partook of the 'Prasad'.

Other provinces witnessed some such sights, and an instance from Gorakhpur in the village Kasia is reported by the *United Press* where the children demanded food from their mother who, in turn, asked them to go to their father. In a fit of anger the father killed both the son and the daughter with a spade.

On October 22, a man and a woman of the fisherman class along with a small girl with them threw themselves before a running train in the eastern suburb of Dacca. The child had a miraculous escape. A case, reported by the *Associated Press* on December 16, as having taken place at Dacca where Ketab Ali, a boy of 13, struck his father fatally with a spade because the latter had failed to provide him with food.

Cases of fathers acting like demons were not rare and it was reported in the *Hindusthan Standard* on November 28, 1943, that

at Thakurgaon, Taori Hat, P. S. Atwari, a man with a female child requested everybody that he met to buy the baby. As nobody agreed to his proposal, the man threw the baby into the well and fled away.

A similar incident was reported in December from Urayahat, Dinajpur, where a father failing to find a buyer for his child, threw it into a nearby well and went away.

A news appeared in the papers on December 12, that extreme want led one Nimlal Jali of village Saila-bandar, under P. S. Baliadangi, to sell his daughter Taktaki to a villager of Purneah District.

On July 13, 1943, in the Bengal Assembly, Khan Bahadur Abdul Wahed Khan said :

It is a fact that girls and women are taken from Bhola

to Kalia side in Patuakhali sub-division and practically sold. Some people have been compelled under the circumstances to divorce their wives for being unable to maintain them.

These are no doubt mere symptoms of a grave disorder but the cases where young girls are involved are more injurious to the society and should be handled with greater caution and sympathy. At Netrokona, in Mymensingh, says a *United Press* message of November 1, rumour of a malpractice of regularly selling destitute girls aged between 3 and 12 in the local prostitutes' quarters was current for sometime when all the local parties combined together under the leadership of the Secretary of the Netrokona Relief Committee and at the instance of the Sub-Divisional Officer rescued a dozen girls from the clutches of the prostitutes. This happened on the 28th night when it became known that these unfortunate girls were being sold at the rate of As. 10 to Rs 1-8 each. The Provincial Secretary, Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, Calcutta, in a statement to the press on December 22 says "that trafficking in minor girls who are brought for sale by boat—among other places—to Chandpur from various parts of East Bengal has increased" and that "two such boat loads of human cargo have quite recently been sold at Chandpur, but the third one was intercepted and handed over to the proper authorities."

A noble example indeed to be emulated by all who have love and respect for the mother, sister, wife and daughter in society !

The statement further says that cases of adult women taking to a life of ill-fame for the sake of a meal are "most noticeable in the eastern zone—Noakhali, Chittagong, Comilla, etc."

In the early part of July 1943, reports from Sylhet were received in Calcutta of all classes of people shifting from certain parts of north-east Bengal to Sylhet due to bombing by the enemy in those areas. Amongst other evils attendant to such mass scale exodus under unforeseen circumstances was the news of adult women being forced to submit to the lust of miscreants. Reports of such cases from other parts of Bengal



were not rare. The plight of destitute women is much worse than the man, said Mrs. Vijayluxmi Pandit in a statement to the Press on October 26. She added,

Cases have been brought to my knowledge of these poor creatures being raped at night while lying on the roads. There also appear to be certain people at work who attempt to decoy women who are destitute and without protection.

Instances of such cases were rampant everywhere and after many months of useless waiting and considerable vascillation the Government of Bengal, on January 10, 1944, expressed

their grave concern at reports received from various sources that young destitute women were being collected by certain persons in various parts of the province with facile promises and were then being sent to different places for the purposes of prostitution.

At a representative meeting of the Calcutta women on January 13, 1944, it was stated that there was

mass prostitution among village women, who on occasions formed as much as half of the total population, who have been left destitute as a result of famine.

Report on the survey of destitutes in and around Calcutta by the Department of Anthropology of the Calcutta University issued on September 27, 1943, will be of inestimable value to all who want to study the effects of famine on society. According to the report :

Husbands have driven away wives and wives have deserted ailing husbands ; children have forsaken aged and disabled parents and parents have also left home in despair ; brothers have turned deaf ears to the entreaties of hungry sisters and widowed sisters, maintained for years together by their brothers, have departed at the time of direct need.

Another report appearing in the *Hindusthan Standard* on December 12, stated that

in one centre, regarding 1,000 out of 1,400 women, the husbands had left them behind in search of food and had not returned. No body knew how many of these men had died. One poor woman was crying saying that her husband had threatened to sell her unless she

would sell her little son. So she had left her son to a woman who would use him only as her begging instrument.

Such cases are the inescapable aftermath of a famine and the greater is the volume and intensity the vaster and deeper are its effects on the society. Nobody knows how long it will take the society to repair such grave injuries inflicted on its body by the famine in all its phases. Shocks like these retard the progress of civilisation by centuries causing enormous drain on the slender resources of rural economy. They throw the normal going of life out of gear and the stopgap arrangement that are resorted to are never sufficient to meet the exigencies of the situation. If the State means to apply itself seriously to the problem, it has to divert its sole attention and a large portion of its revenue resources to the rehabilitation of the society or the normal progress in other spheres will be held up for years.

## “DIRE SCENES OF HORROR”

WHERE persons die in large numbers, it is always difficult to arrange for their proper disposal according to the religious rites of the respective communities to which they belonged in life. A very considerable part of the dead lie strewn unattended at all places. Some are thrown into the rivers and streams, or taken to the outskirts of the village and left there to rot and decay in the natural course or to be devoured by vultures, dogs, jackals and other animals. It is not a rare sight when these animals are found to be busy with the corpses even at places where people abound. The animals are not scared away from their act simply because in such a case the dead will be lying there for an indefinite period for want of men to remove them elsewhere.

The case with the dying is more pathetic. Victims of circumstances, they are too weak, through starvation and consequent weakness, to move from place to place. They lie helplessly in the hope that somebody may come to their succour and make the approaching death a little more peaceful where intense pain and utter despair prevail. Not unoften their conditions tempt the rapacious animals to fall upon their preys before life is extinct or even when they are in full possession of the senses. There may be some cases where the feeble voice of the dying might have attracted the notice of a passerby and the man has been saved from further attacks of the animal. There is not a single report where the victim has survived such attacks.

Numerous reports from all the districts of the province appeared in the daily newspapers and it can be said without any fear of contradiction that only a small portion of them came to the notice of the public and reported to the newspaper correspondents. The cases where dead bodies, whether in the once congested quarters of the villages or towns, or places far away from human habitation, have been devoured by animals must

be legion and if ever a true record of such cases is prepared it would, by its sheer number and the touching circumstances under which they occurred, will stagger humanity.

The *United Press* in a message on August 21, 1943, stated that

lately in a fight between a hungry boy and a hungry dog for a portion of rejected cooked rice at Patrasayer, Bishnupur, the boy, son of Narain Bouri, has been severely bitten by the dog.

His condition was reported to be precarious and no history will record the death of hundreds and thousands of children like the boy of Narain Bowri bitten to death by dogs and jackals all over Bengal during this time.

A fragment of the hundreds of cases of dying men being attacked by dogs and jackals were reported in the papers and a few among these would go to show the extent of the misery of helpless people too weak from starvation to defend themselves against such attacks.

On September 10, 1943, the *Associated Press* reported from Brahmanbaria of a case where a man was found lying prostrate and motionless on the roadside at Mogra Bazar. At midnight, a jackal fell upon him and was biting his leg when his groans attracted the notice of a passerby. The man was saved from further attacks of the jackal for the time being but ultimately succumbed to the injuries.

A correspondent of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote from Chandpur on September 27, (published on October 5) that :

A respectable gentleman of village Boalia, within Chandpur Municipality, reports that a starving destitute Hindu male, aged nearly 50, almost dying, was dragged by a jackal yesterday, while he was still alive and lying on the village road.

The *Associated Press* further reported from Dacca on October 1, that the

unclaimed dead body of a Hindu boy of about 12 years partly devoured by jackals and vultures was found yesterday morning lying in front of the Government Grain Shop near Chashara Police Outpost at Narayanganj. It is suspected that the boy was molested by jackals and

vultures (?) in the preceding night when he was in a precarious condition owing to starvation.

Mrs. Rajan Nehru, Secretary, All-India Women's Conference, in a statement to the Press on October 18, 1943, said that :

It was not an uncommon sight at Contai to see dogs and vultures waiting beside dying children for their share of human flesh.

It can be well surmised that all of these animals did not wait for the last breath to escape from the dying man in a competition to start the work before others.

The *Associated Press* issued the following news on October 25, about an incident in the Barodi Union in the Narayanganj Sub-division of Dacca :

Recently a famished fisherman, who was reduced to bone and skin, came from the interior and took gruel in the free kitchen of the Union. He lay down nearby. In the morning the people were shocked to see that a portion of his body had been devoured by jackals. *His life was not still extinct.* It is believed that when the jackals attacked him at night he was too weak to resist or to cry for help. The man died shortly after ;

certainly much to the relief of not only himself but all who had to witness such a sight.

The *United Press* message dated October 31, from Gosainrhat (Faridpur) gave a pathetic story of a living man being devoured by dogs and jackals. The message stated that there had been three other cases of a like nature.

From Munshiganj the *United Press* reported on November 2, that "a dying man was seen in front of the local Muktear's library being devoured by jackals and dogs. The man died shortly afterwards".

The same news agency narrated an incident from Tamluk happening on November 3, which had its replica in hundreds of other places during this period. The report said :

At Debipore, a small village in Tamluk Sub-division where an old man while passing by the side of a 'khal' stumbled down and three hungry jackals pounced upon him and severely mauled him. Some passersby scared

away the jackals and saved him, but he is lying in a precarious condition.

In this case the 'jackals' could not be 'hungry' as there were any number of dead bodies lying here and there to feed upon in Tamluk at the time. It is their nature to 'pounce upon' the prey if it is too weak to resist. Another factor is true. The man who had not the strength to carry his own weight on his legs could not survive the attack of jackals from all sides. It was too immaterial to record his death.

In Ekdalia, a suburb of Serajgunj Municipality, on Wednesday morning (November 10) a dead body of a young villager was found devoured by the jackals. He was a starving destitute and sometime back he had sold his all and lived in an open verandah and it is apprehended that jackals fell upon him and began to eat him up even when life was still lingering

in his mortal frame.

Sister Dolores of the St. Francis Xavier's Convent engaged in relief work in Dacca, stated to a newspaper staff reporter of Calcutta on November 15, 1943, that

some days ago they found a woman groaning by the roadside and on approaching she discovered to her astonishment that she had lost both of her eyes. There were two gaping wounds in her two eye-sockets, which were full of maggots. She was too weak to offer any resistance.

The report goes that it was with great difficulty that Sister Dolores could procure a seat for her in a hospital. There were thousands on the streets and roadsides whose wounds and sores were worse than those of the woman mentioned above. She was lucky enough (if luck it was) to attract the attention of a kind-hearted lady engaged in relief work and through her she not only got a seat in a hospital but publicity in the press as well. Her case is a glaring condemnation of the system of Government under which she was living and also an eloquent commentary on the existing form of civilization that is heading towards its ruin.

Another American lady, engaged in relief work at Dacca

described a still more horrible sight. She witnessed, on her way from Hasanabad to Dacca, about the middle of November

that a helpless and exhausted grown-up child was being attacked by dogs and jackals on the bank of a water way.

As it was the child could not be saved.

Dogs and jackals, vultures and crows, maggots and worms, —in fact all the well-known "nature's scavengers", must have been good friends to the hapless Bengali who had outlived the famine. But for these creatures the skies of Bengal must have been a stinking pit dealing death to the living. The countryside would still have presented the sight of a veritable hell if all the corpses unattended by the living were lying to rot in the sun.

The city of Calcutta was not spared the sight of the corpse of a boy, partly devoured by dogs, lying on the pavements of the Cornwallis Street in September. It is one of the arterial roads of the second city of the Empire, and the area in which this woeful sight was to be seen is one of the busiest and most congested quarters of the city. This single instance serves well to accentuate what had been happening in other parts of the city, not to mention of the far-away villages in the interior. Those were real galadays for the lesser carnivores who were daily holding very jolly feasts indeed.

On August 26, Mr. S. K. Das, President, Midnapore Flood and Cyclone Relief Committee, stated that at Contai "many villagers are dying in the streets. Those who die during the night are being eaten away by dogs and jackals".

A correspondent writes to the *Statesman* on September 13 (published on the 16th idem) :

A letter received from the Rangpur district tells of hundreds dying and the body of a girl of 17 under a tree, dead of starvation, being devoured by vultures.

On September 17, 1943, the *Associated Press* reported from Madaripur that "a destitute child was recently devoured by jackals in the Municipal market compound". Mr. Narendra Nath Das said on September 17, 1943, in the Bengal Legislative Assembly that "about ten days ago a dead body was eaten by a dog a few yards away from the Collectorate in the town of

Barisal itself". The *United Press* message from Munshiganj dated September 26, stated that "the dead body of a male destitute was found on the 23rd morning near the compound of the Haraganga College. The body was partly devoured by some animal".

Writing from Burdwan on September 26, 1943, the *Associated Press* representative stated :

Dead bodies are frequently noticed lying by the side of roads in the town. This morning near the Tentultola Bazar the dead body of a child, in a state of decomposition was found eaten by street dogs. (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Oct. 3).

The Nilphamari correspondent of the *Hindusthan Standard*, reported (published on October 19) that,

Dead bodies lying in streets of towns and villages are no rare scenes. Even three days ago a dead body, half portion of which was eaten up by dogs and jackals, was found in a street of the town.

The correspondent of a Calcutta newspaper at Madaripur stated on October 21, 1943 :

That on the night of the 15th instant two sons of Lokenath Sil died of starvation. The one died within 15 minutes of the other and both were burnt on the same pyre.

It goes on

In the morning of the 15th instant the dead body of a destitute, half portion of which was devoured by jackals, was found by the side of the street near the local Dak Bungalow and sweepers threw the body into the river Arialkhan.

A correspondent of the *Hindusthan Standard* reported on October 22, from Dacca that in the morning the dead body of a child was found to be carried by a dog in his mouth. The legs up to the waist had been devoured by dogs and jackals during the previous night. It is surmised that the child was left on the wayside by the mother due to want of food and was killed by the jackals.

A *United Press* message from Tangail on October 24, 1943,



stated that a peasant of village Rasulpur after going without food for more than three days with the entire family sold some corrugated sheets covering his hut and came to buy bajra from the Government controlled shop at Tangail. Due to heavy rush at the shop he could not make his purchase. On his way back he died on the road. The next morning his relatives discovered the dead body partly devoured by jackals and vultures.

A *United Press* correspondent writing from Munshiganj, published on October 24, 1943, stated that

One dead body was found dragged by a jackal from the verandah of the local Civil Court towards the nearest khal.

Relating her experience gathered during a tour of the Midnapore district to the *Associated Press* on October 26, 1943, Mrs. Vijayaluxmi Pandit said :

I saw three dead bodies and five skeletons between Kharagpur and Contai. One body had already been attacked and the contents of the stomach removed—a dog finishing the work begun by the vultures.

The *United Press* message of October 29, from Burdwan stated :

On Wednesday, the 27th morning, the dead body of a famished man was found almost eaten up by vultures and lying by the side of Banisagar tank in this town.

One good fortune befell this ‘famished man’ because the report says that “the body was removed by the police to the burning ghat”.

A newspaper correspondent writing from Masagram, Burdwan, on October 28, reported that a woman, while wandering in quest of food near the ‘Bele’ cremation ground, in the outskirts of the village, fell down out of sheer exhaustion. The next morning her body was found while it was being devoured by jackals and vultures. A part of her arm was carried by dogs to a nearby house.

On October 28, at Alipur Duar, a dead body was eaten up by the jackals in the heart of the town itself. This was published on November 2. On the same date, a woman, partly

It should be remembered that street scenes that would not outrage the feelings, but only create sympathy in the human heart, were being reproduced in the papers. Events that had been termed "dire scenes of horror" by Sir John Shore (subsequently Lord Teignmouth) were taking place here, there and everywhere.

Sir Jagadish Prasad, an ex-Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, to whom Bengal owes a deep debt of gratitude for taking personal interest in the matter and visiting rural areas inspite of great personal discomfort, issued the following statement on September 10, to the Calcutta press :

I would very respectfully suggest to high-placed officials in Delhi, who deprecated the over-dramatization of the sufferings of the people of Bengal to pay a visit to that province. They will then cease to talk platitudes in tones of detachment. The evidence of their eyes will soon convince them that Bengal is faced with one of the worst famines in living memory.

Subsequent events during October, November and December 1943, made it abundantly clear that there had not only been no over-dramatization but that, in the words of Pandit H. N. Kunzru, in the Council of State on November 18 :

If the truth had been told earlier, the situation would not have deteriorated to the extent it did. Whoever had controlled the news about Bengal, had done a very serious injustice to that Province....

All reports go to show that the description of Sir John Shore of the scenes of famine of 1770 reproduced below, now pales into insignificance in comparison with the miseries that took place in Bengal after she had enjoyed two hundred years of peaceful reign under the British Raj :

Still fresh in memory's eye the scene I view,  
The shrivelled limbs, sunk eyes, the lifeless hue ;  
Still hear the mother's shrieks and infant's moans,  
Cries of despair and agonising groans.  
In wild confusion dead and dying lie :  
Hark to the jackal's yell and vulture's cry,  
The dog's fell howl, as midst the glare of day  
They riot unmolested on their prey !  
Dire scenes of horror, which no pen can trace,  
Nor rolling years from memory's page efface.

## THE CATAclysm

THERE is a certain part of the population of Bengal, not to speak of that of the whole of India, which goes without food intermittently throughout the whole year; to them a full meal is a luxury. So even in normal times cases of death from starvation are by no means infrequent. But these deaths are not recorded as caused by starvation, but are attributed to various causes such as malaria, respiratory diseases, bowel complaints, and to that very vague but very significant official jargon of "other causes". The year 1943 saw only a "pronounced expression" of the scarcity that has become a permanent feature of the existing state of affairs in India.

With the war the miseries of the people increased a thousandfold and in gradually mounting numbers they began to go without food. The pull on the country's limited stock of food began to be severe and more severe as the war progressed.

In normal times a large number of people commit suicide every year to avoid the pangs of hunger. Some parents, out of sheer despair, put an end to their lives, to avoid the distressing thought and sight of starving children and other dependants dying helplessly before their eyes. The unfortunate children are left to their fate, and unless chance favours them they fall victims of starvation. Suicide cases are reported in the official registers as such, but the real causes for such violent acts on one's own life are never mentioned anywhere. In 1943, as a matter of course, suicide cases increased in a large number and Mr. Syed Badrudduja stated before the members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly on March 10, that,

From my own constituency at Murshidabad, in Jalangi P. S., in Sadar Sub-division, I received a report only a few days ago that a man goaded on to uncontrollable desperation, committed suicide by hanging himself on the tree.... I have had reports from other sources also that some people had taken poison and committed suicide.

It should be remembered that street scenes that would not outrage the feelings, but only create sympathy in the human heart, were being reproduced in the papers. Events that had been termed "dire scenes of horror" by Sir John Shore (subsequently Lord Teignmouth) were taking place here, there and everywhere.

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It is needless to say that reports of suicide, were received from almost every village in Bengal. It went on unabated, for food was becoming increasingly scarce in bigger areas. Starvation death swelled the total mortality figures during this time. Mr. Badrudduja, in the same speech stated above, said,

For days together we have had reports from various quarters in the mofussil areas that people are dying of starvation....

The speech refers to deaths from starvation in a period before March 1943, when Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq was the Premier. It is not known what he did, except writing strong notes to the Governor for checking the rising tide of famine. It would have been consistent with the position he had adopted regarding interference by the Governor in the day to day administration of the Province to have resigned and thus precipitate a constitutional crisis. It was extremely unfortunate that he and his other colleagues clung to office till they were literally driven out.

In April 1943, reports were published in the newspapers of Calcutta of a man dying for taking grass as a 'substitute food'. The streets of Calcutta and of the mufassil towns began to be crowded by 'wanderers' in quest of food. On June 15, 1943, about 600 people flocked at Jalpaiguri from different parts of Murshidabad and the neighbouring districts. Burdwan Municipal Death Register recorded 40 deaths from starvation in June, and 78 in July. These figures did not include dead bodies buried in the town area.

The Bhola Sub-division in Barisal from the first up to the last month of 1943 suffered a tremendous ordeal. On July 14, it was reported "that hundreds of hungry people had been flooding the town". The District Magistrate, on receipt of information hastened to the place on the 14th and "*before his very eyes three unfortunates breathed their last*". Said Khan Bahadur Abdul Wahed Khan on July 13, 1943, in the Bengal Legislative Assembly :

...I have toured in Bhola and Sadar North and had reliable reports of actual death from starvation... It is

a fact that in one place people took meat of dead cows only to save their lives.

From now on the newspapers began publishing statistics of death in various districts of Bengal and it is impossible to mention all of them here. Some of these deserve notice only to prove that scarcity was widespread from June 1943, or even earlier, and people were dying in large numbers. The *United Press* reported 157 deaths from starvation in two hospitals at Chandpur between July 25 and September 9. According to the *Associated Press*, Mymensingh recorded 60 deaths between June 24 and mid-September. A correspondent of the *Hindustan Standard* thus reported : "About 500 people died of starvation in the streets of Contai during July, August and September and their bodies buried." This was published on October 5, 1943. Between July and November 20, "about 2,000 men, women and children in Satkhira died of starvation, malnutrition, cholera and malaria" according to the *Associated Press*. In August, Burdwan recorded 97 deaths from starvation in the Municipal Death Register, excluding dead bodies disposed of elsewhere. According to the *United Press*, "133 persons died on the streets of Narainganj during August and during the fortnight ending September 14, four to five persons, on an average, died daily on the streets". At Faridpur, 34 persons died in August. There were many other reports of a similar nature and it is useless to enumerate all of them. From September onwards the dance of death was visible everywhere in Bengal. Cholera and other attendant diseases of famine joined hands and enjoyed a merry game till they slackened their grip for want of victims.

While the country was passing through acute distress for want of food, no preparation was made to cope with its inevitable aftermath. It was a known fact that pestilence would be coming and the Government ought to have been in readiness for such a contingency. The question of Major-General R. Strachey, the President of the Famine Commission of 1878-79 to Sir Richard Temple, the then Governor of Bombay, is relevant on this point.

**Q. 183 :** Do you think it possible in a serious famine to prevent mortality ?

**A. :** As regards mortality from hunger or starvation,—certainly, Yes. As regards mortality from the disease which sometimes, but not always, accompany famine, such as small pox, cholera, dysentery, fever,—certainly, Not.

Even in October 1943, there was no question of ascertaining the number of deaths that were taking place in the different districts and it was stated by Mr. L. Amery, the Secretary of State for India, on October 14, 1943, in the House of Commons,

that he understood that the death rate in Bengal was estimated at about 1,000 a week, including Calcutta, but it might be higher.

This was an underestimate on the face of it and evoked a sharp retort from the *Statesman* on October 16, 1943. The comment was :

The Secretary of State for India seems to be a strangely misinformed man. Unless the cables are unfair to him, he told Parliament on Thursday that he understood that the weekly death-roll (presumably from starvation) in Bengal including Calcutta was about 1,000, but that it "might be higher". All the publicly available data indicate that it is very much higher ; and his great office ought to afford him ample means for discovery. The continuous appearance of effort on the part of persons somewhere within India's Governmental machine, perhaps out here, perhaps in Whitehall, to play down, suppress, distort, or muffle the truth about Bengal is dragging the fair name of the British Raj needlessly low. It contrasts most remarkably with the attitude taken during the famines near the end of the last century. Then, in the heyday of British imperial responsibility, though modern facilities for organization were lacking, no effort was spared to probe and proclaim the truth about any maladministration, so that it might be promptly dealt with and the blot on the honour of the Indian Empire removed.

Pandit H. N. Kunzru, who had made an extensive tour of the most affected parts of the Province to see things for himself giving his estimate of deaths in Bengal at a Press Conference on November 1, 1943, at New Delhi, said that ·



one or two officials he met agreed that one death per week per village was a fair estimate. That meant that even if half the total number of villages in the province were free from starvation deaths, at least 50,000 such deaths were taking place over the whole province.

Again on November 13, speaking at Allahabad before the Progressive Club of the Allahabad University, Panditji said that

he felt that 1,000 people in every sub-division were affected and on a conservative estimate 50,000 persons were dying every week.

He asked the members to keep in mind that Bengal had 90,000 villages.

On November 21, Panditji revised his estimate and said at New Delhi that "the statistics and information supplied to Mr. Amery were incorrect" and he estimated the death rate at a lakh per week.

How much misinformed Mr. Amery was will be evident from his remarks on the prevalence of cholera in Bengal in October. Replying to a question in the Commons on October 21, Mr. Amery said that there had been reports of cholera in various parts of India but he had hitherto had no indication of any widespread outbreak or of any special difficulty experienced by the Provincial Governments concerned. In reply to another question he said that 'there was no shortage of medical supplies and no widespread outbreak of disease'.

It is not possible to collect all the reports of death from cholera and other diseases that appeared in the newspapers during this period. A few of these stray notes collected from the several issues of newspapers in September, i.e., long before the date when Mr. Amery made his statement, will show the hollowness of his remarks.

A correspondent from Dinajpur wrote in the second week of September :

Five persons died on the 9th. Many destitutes are found lying almost dead on the roadside. Cholera is also taking its toll. The authorities of the Sadar Hospital had to refuse admission to several cases attacked with

cholera. Several people of this town have also died of cholera which is raging in some quarters of the town.

On September 14, a Dacca report says :

Toll of cholera in the city is increasing. Deaths registered in the Municipality due to "other causes" totalled 115 in the week.

A report from Bankura on the conditions in the middle of September in the district ran thus :

Reports are daily reaching Bankura that cholera, malaria, fever, dysentery and similar other maladies, which are direct effects of continued starvation and consumption of uneatable things by the starving people have broken out in epidemic form. Reports of hundred such deaths have been received. (Published on October 1, 1943).

A Member of the Bengal Legislative Council from Chittagong said on October 9, that "deaths from malaria, cholera and other diseases totalled 500 to 550 per month". A Naogaon correspondent reported (published on October 9) that "in the month of September 1,000 died of cholera in the sub-division. Jiaganj (Murshidabad), Satkhira (Khulna), Bogra and almost every other district reported deaths from cholera in September and in the first week of October. It is needless to give further details of such deaths for the simple reason that all that has been stated will be sufficient to prove that Mr. Amery was completely wrong in saying in the third week of October that there was no widespread outbreak of cholera anywhere. Cholera devastated the districts throughout October and November and Mr. Amery admitted on December 2, (with regret of course) that

a serious outbreak of cholera in Bengal has followed upon the famine. During October deaths in the Province from this disease averaged 5,349 per week. In the first week of November they were 4,464.

On December 16, 1943, Mr. Amery again said in the Commons that

the total deaths from cholera in the whole of Bengal Presidency between June 27 and November 30 was 77,938.

Again a gross underestimate.

Malaria raged furiously all over the province. Dysentery, dropsy, small-pox, etc., took their toll in hundreds of thousands. These are 'famine-deaths' for all practical purposes and the remarks of the Famine Commissioners, 1867, on this point will be interesting :

*We think it quite impossible to distinguish between the mortality directly caused by starvation and that due to disease. Not only do our remarks regarding the want of statistics apply to this subject also, but in truth want and disease run so much into one another that no statistics and no observations would suffice to draw an accurate line. The death of emaciated and exhausted from cold, exposure and bowel diseases, either before receiving, or upon receiving food (the last is a very common form), may in fact be considered the direct result of starvation.* The principal diseases of a destructive character, in respect of which it is often impossible to say whether it has been caused by want is cholera. We believe we are correct in saying that, even where there is no epidemic cholera very generally spread, it has constantly happened that the famine-stricken have been carried off by that disease, or by something presenting similar appearance. The truth we take to be simply this, that the ordinary outbursts of cholera were aggravated and extended by want and bad food. *The first effect of the scarcity, universally was to drive the people to subsist on unusual and unwholesome food, jungle roots, and such like, and we find cholera constantly accompanied want.* (Italics mine.)

Even if it was admitted that deaths from cholera alone, upto November 30, were 77,938, on January 20, 1944, Mr. Amery said in the Commons that

there are still no reliable figures but the Government of India on the basis of the present information consider that the abnormal mortality due to famine and to disease in the last five months *have not exceeded one million.*

It was expected that as it has very often been the case with him, Mr. Amery would revise his statements on 'further information', and that a genuine effort would be made to ascertain, as far as possible, the actual number of deaths from starvation

and the attendant diseases. The people were disillusioned when it was discovered that the Bengal Government was busy improving upon the last statement of Mr. Amery and stated in the Bengal Council, through their Minister for Public Health, that,

on the basis of figures so far received it was accepted that the total excess in the number of deaths during 1943 over the average of normal years would be between 6 and 7 lakhs. These figures included deaths from all causes, cholera, malaria, small-pox as well as sheer starvation.

The Government further said on February 26, 1944, "that they were not in a position to give the number of deaths that had occurred from starvation" because "*the chowkidars are the persons who report deaths and it is not at all safe to give them the authority to find out the real cause of deaths*". The 'starvation cases' are entered in a column under "Deaths from Other Causes" in the death register kept by the chowkidar.

On March 11, 1944, a Press Note<sup>1</sup> stated that the excess number in 1943 over the average of the total number of deaths in other years was 6,88,846, and this figure, Mr. Amery said on March 23, 1944, in the Commons,

roughly represents the number of deaths due to starvation, malnutrition impairing resistance to disease as well as abnormal epidemic diseases not associated with malnutrition. It is an approximate measure of the great economic disaster which afflicted Bengal last year.

And he 'was glad', as all must be, that "very much larger figures quoted in some quarters have turned out to be erroneous".

The dramatic effect produced by the Bengal Government and the Secretary of State for India was marred to a certain extent

1 "The total mortality rate of the Province in 1943 from all causes shows an increase of 58 per cent over the average of last 5 years. The average number of deaths per year is 11,84,903 and in 1943 the actual number amounted to 18,73,749, the excess over the average being 6,88,846.

"Deaths from cholera numbered 2,14,175 or 1,60,909 above the average. Deaths from malaria numbered 6,74,330 or 2,85,792 above the average. Deaths from small-pox numbered 22,005 or 14,075 above the average."

when in reply to a question of Sir Frederick James, in the Central Assembly on March 14, 1944, the Secretary for Education, Health and Lands said that "the machinery for the collection of these statistics were *exactly* the same in 1943 as in the previous years".

The chowkidar is then the primary source from whom emanates the vital statistics of the Indian Empire. Who is a chowkidar and what are his functions? The chowkidar is a paid 'officer' of the Government drawing a salary of Rs. 6 to Rs. 7 per month. The payment of this 'magnificent' sum is always irregular and, due to chronic emptiness of the local coffers, it is almost universally in arrears. He is a night-watchman of the village (including watch over 'dagis' or habitual offenders, or other suspects), the investigating officer in cases of robbery, unnatural death, etc., bearer or chaprasi in the office, courier boy of official correspondence and domestic servant of the President and of the distinguished members of the local bodies. He has to satisfy the 'Daroga Saheb' or the 'Jamadar Saheb' of the police outpost by carrying out their departmental and extra-departmental behests including marketing and the tending of cattle. He is to guard the railway track (and in this act he sometimes falls victim to the attack of wild animals) for the safe travel of very high officials and to look after the comforts of the 'Sahebs' from the Sadar when they are pleased to pay official visits in the locality and put up in the dak bungalow. He is to prevent boundary disputes and watch safe harvesting of crops, give peaceful possession to one successful in litigation and help the process server, an officer of the judicial service, in the identification of persons and premises for the services of summons. He has, from time to time, to report himself at a distance of several miles to the Sadar for his 'blue-black' kits and to appear in District Courts as material witness of the Crown. Such a hard-worked man is the supplier, or more properly, the compiler of all official statistics relating to acreage and yield of all principal crops, livestock, carts and vehicles, sugar-cane crushers, ploughs and tractors, date and palm trees for the assessment of total production of 'gur' in the land. He

is the "Government Reporter" of 'market prices of commodities'. He is to report for computation of the *birth and death registers* of the countryside. In variety of duties which he has to perform, in the motley combination of masters which he has to please and in the gravity of responsibility which he has to shoulder, he can claim equality with the occupant of the White House or of No. 10 Downton Street. To keep away the cares and anxieties with which he is always beset, in most cases, these poor men find solace and comfort in some strong narcotics or exhilarating drinks. His lot is worse than that of a teacher for whom we feel so much.

Such is the man who has supplied the 'vital statistics' of the famine. He must have been perplexed by inflation, want of food and other necessities of life, disease and cares and anxieties that prevailed in the land. In most cases they were dead and possibly they could not in anticipation enter this important fact in the relevant register. Perhaps he was ill and still he is so; or he was taken away from his station in search of food or for shifting his family from place to place. He might have gone elsewhere to attend on or to perform the last rites of 'sick destitute' relatives.

The *Associated Press* reported from Dacca on December 10, 1943 :

Six Muslim families consisting of 4 to 10 members each *including the family of a village chowkidar*, have been entirely wiped out.

In such circumstances it is not possible for the chowkidar to keep his records posted with all facts.

In normal times he cannot discharge his duties faithfully for various other reasons. The following tables will tell their own tale. It will be found that vital statistics differ from actual facts by 50 per cent or more when there is nothing extraordinary to interfere with correct recording of births and deaths.

In 1911 Bengal, including Bihar and Orissa and excluding the Eastern Bengal and the States, had a population of 52,468, 818. Due to readjustment of boundary consequent on the

introduction of Reforms the population decreased considerably and stood at 45,329,247 in 1912. In the census of 1921 it was found that the population had increased to 46,522,293, i.e., an addition of 1,193,046 persons during a period of nine years, from 1912 to 1920. But from a study of the birth and death register it is discovered that the 'normal increase' was 394,983 and the presence of 799,063 persons in Bengal at the end of 1920 could not be accounted for.

*Table showing Births and Deaths from 1912 to 1920 and the balance of each year, Increase (+) or Decrease (—).*

Year	Birth	Death	Increase (+) or Decrease (—)
1912	1,600,335	1,349,779	+ 250,556
1913	1,529,921	1,331,868	+ 198,053
1914	1,535,281	1,431,289	+ 103,992
1915	1,441,628	1,488,569	—46,939
1916	1,445,592	1,241,621	+ 204,571
1917	1,627,873	1,187,509	+ 440,364
1918	1,489,135	1,727,331	—238,196
1919	1,245,392	1,641,111	—395,719
1920	1,359,913	1,481,612	—121,699
			+ 1,197,536
			—802,553
			<hr/>
			'Natural increase' + 394,983

The figures prove that 67 per cent of the increase in population was not recorded in the official registers.

It may be contended on behalf of the Government that the 'error' or discrepancy mentioned above is not a regular feature but was a mere accident. It is, therefore, the statistics for the next ten years have been given below to show the exact position regarding the vital statistics of Bengal (excluding States and the Chittagong Hill Tracts) as kept by the 'chowkidars' :

*Table showing Births and Deaths from 1921 to 1930 and the balance of each year, Increase (+) or Decrease (—).*

Year	Birth	Death	Increase (+) or Decrease (—)
1921	1,301,001	1,403,030	— 102,029
1922	1,275,614	1,173,246	+ 102,368
1923	1,393,411	1,185,791	+ 207,620
1924	1,370,114	1,203,244	+ 166,870
1925	1,377,097	1,158,473	+ 218,624
1926	1,276,380	1,151,197	+ 125,183
1927	1,286,863	1,189,370	+ 97,493
1928	1,375,680	1,189,015	+ 186,665
1929	1,361,278	1,094,263	+ 267,015
1930	1,237,831	1,044,256	+ 193,575
			—
			+ 1,565,413
			— 102,029
			—
		'Natural increase'	+ 1,463,384

The table of statistics given above show an increase of 1,463,384 persons. But the census of 1931 disclosed that the population had actually increased to 49,901,080 from 46,522,293 in 1921, i.e., an addition of 3,378,787. It means that 56% of the total persons living in Bengal in 1931 came to the world unnoticed and was successful in evading an entry in the birth register of the village chowkidar. It is ridiculous to come to any finite decision on data obtained from this source.

The acute conditions that prevailed in 1943 prevented the recording of deaths and of births due to the several handicaps placed by circumstances around the activities of the chowkidar. There were other reasons for which it was not at all possible for him to find out dead bodies strewn everywhere. The weak, the emaciated and the dying could not find out the chowkidar and request him to enter their names in the death register. Nor did the relatives, who under the law are responsible for the registration of births and deaths in the family had the opportunity, strength or inclination to perform their duties to avoid the operation of the law. Cases, an infinitesimal number



of which have been enumerated in the chapter, "*Dire Scenes of Horror*" could not be recorded for obvious reasons.

Then there were cases where corpses were lying here and there uncared for and unattended because there were no men to carry them either to the burning ghats or to the burial ground. It is not at all possible to record cases of death when even the eye of a casual visitor from the foreign lands could not escape noticing a number of dead bodies lying on the roadside. On October 20, 1943, Senator Ralph A. Brewster,

one of the globe-trotting Senators, described the Bengal famine as *terrible* and said that the Senatorial Committee *saw dead people lying around the streets, and women and children in the last stages of starvation.* (Italics mine.)

Is it possible for a chowkidar to record such deaths faithfully ?

As early as September 11, the District Relief Committee, Noakhali, appealed to the public through the *Associated Press* for help and expressed the condition of the people and the problem of disposal of the dead in the following terms :

There is scarcely any medical aid worth the name. Men, women and children are dying daily in great numbers, some on roads and at other public places. Disposal of the dead bodies has become a problem with the living. Sometimes *dead bodies are thrown into the river instead of being properly buried or cremated.*

An *Associated Press* message from Madaripur reported on September 17, that

cremation of Hindu dead bodies has become quite a problem for want of fuel. *Dead bodies of destitute persons are often thrown into the river or buried.*

A report from Manikganj dated the 2nd September, 1943, (published on the 6th) ran as follows :

More than a dozen deaths have taken place in the town itself from the effect of starvation. Cases of death of famished people are being daily reported from the interior. *Dead bodies are occasionally seen floating in the river.*

The *United Press* reported on September 16, 1943, from

Munshiganj that "as no wood fuel is available, the dead bodies cannot be cremated and are thrown into the water". Mr. Sudhir Ghosh of the *Friends' Ambulance Unit* wrote on September 17, 1942, from Contai (published in the *Statesman* on the 20th) :

During the last fortnight there has not been a morning on which I have not seen, as I went out of the town on my jobs, dead bodies by the roadside. *A fight between vultures and dogs is not a rare sight...* Disposal of dead bodies has become a problem. In the villages the affairs are worse ; people are dying in large numbers of malaria and starvation. *There are not enough able-bodied men to burn the dead, which often are just pushed into the nearest canal.* If you go down the canal from Contai to Panipia, *you will feel sick ; for the bloated dead bodies you will see will be numerous.*

On October 25, 1943, Mrs. Vijayluxmi Pandit related her experience of a tour of the famine-affected areas of Midnapore to the Calcutta newspapers. She said :

In some instances such cases (cholera cases) are removed to the cremation ground before life is extinct and are simply thrown into the river or canal as soon as they are dead.

In several places *bodies had been thrown into a wayside pool* and the stench of decomposing flesh was foul.

A correspondent from Contai sent the following report to the Press on November 7 (published on the 10th) :

In the villages of Unions Nos. 3, 4 and 6 in the Contai subdivision about 500 people, it is learnt, died of starvation. *Almost all the dead bodies were thrown into the 'khal' and paddy fields, to be devoured by dogs, jackals and vultures, as there was no man available to bury or burn those corpses.*

On December 8, 1943, the *Associated Press* reported from Jessore :

During the four weeks beginning with 24th October and ending with 20 November, there were 1,496 attacks and 1,074 deaths from cholera. Many dead bodies have been devoured by dogs, jackals and vultures. For want of men to burn or bury dead bodies, many lie about the street for four or five days.

When and the manner in which they are disposed of nobody knows.

A few of the hundreds and thousands of cases of dead bodies being devoured by dogs, jackals and vultures or thrown into the rivers and 'khals' and paddy fields or given mass burial or wholesale cremation have been enumerated; and the majority must have escaped public notice.

Mr. Amery expressed great satisfaction that 'very much larger figures (than what he had given) and quoted in some quarters had turned out to be erroneous'. The 'larger figures' referred to by Mr. Amery were accepted by the people who had seen things for themselves and by those who had experience of the ordeal through great personal sufferings. Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru has had first hand knowledge of the real picture of the interior villages and his observation on March 18, 1944, in the Council of State was 'that the deaths due to all causes amounted to about two millions'. It may even be an underestimate. Wrote the Special Correspondent of the *Times of India* on November 16, 1943<sup>1</sup> :

One class of labourer, the Namasudras, alone numbers 3,000,000 in Bengal, and it is not impossible that a third of these have died.

Then there is the report of the Anthropology Department of the Calcutta University published in the press on February 21, 1944, which placed the total deaths at about three and half millions. The report<sup>2</sup> says :

...The statistics for eight districts have been tabulated. They cover 816 family units with a total membership of 3,880. The total deaths in these groups during June-July, 1943 to November-December, 1943, has been 386 or 10 per cent (*i.e.*, 100 per thousand) in six months. ... As the death rate for Bengal does not exceed 30 per thousand per annum in normal years, *i.e.*, 15 per thousand for six months, the excess mortality (100-15) or 85 per thousand, *i.e.*, eight and half per cent, has to be ascribed to famine and the pestilence that followed in its wake. As some of the areas in North Bengal were

1 Quoted in *Why This Starvation ?* by M. R. Masani, p. 2.

2 See Appendix.

much less affected than Western or Central Bengal or the deficit areas of Eastern Bengal, some reduction has to be made to estimate the total mortality figures for Bengal. It will probably be an underestimate of the famine to say that two-thirds of the total population were affected more or less by it. On this basis *the probable total number of deaths above the normal come to well over three and half millions.* The estimate is subject to probable error inherent in all sample surveys.

The report certainly admits of improvement, but it is no doubt much better than the guess work indulged in by the Government. It is not unlikely that the number of deaths in the report may disclose a higher figure if a faithful survey is made without any further delay.

There is the evidence of respectable correspondents of responsible newspapers and also reports of dependable news agencies such as the *United Press* and the *Associated Press* and all of them go to show that the mortality was extremely high and the distress of the people boundless.

We have the testimony of impartial observers like Pandit Kunzru, Mrs. Pandit, Sir Jagadish Prasad and a host of other gentlemen who narrated their experience regarding the magnitude of the suffering of the people. Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, Hony. Secretary, All-India Muslim League and Nawab Md. Ismail Khan, Chairman, All-India Muslim League Defence Committee, after a tour of rural Bengal issued a statement to the Press on October 30, 1943, in the course of which they said :

In this statement we do not propose to give a detailed account of all that we have seen or depict the gruesome picture of misery that stalks the land which has left an indelible mark on our memory. It is sufficient to say that the distress is real, widespread and calamitous.

Referring to the figures given in the Press from time to time of the number of destitutes they said :

The figures fall far short of the numbers actually affected by this catastrophe. These figures do not take into account the lower middle classes, who have sold away all that they possessed including their land and houses to feed themselves and their families from black market and whose

self-respect prevents them from making a public exhibition of their destitution.

Speaking of the actual percentage affected by the catastrophe they remarked :

It is of course very difficult to give the exact percentage of the population that is suffering from hardship, hunger and starvation, but we surmise, from what we have seen, that at least *20 per cent of the population is living under most pitiable conditions.*

Communications from the correspondents to the Press from all parts of Bengal were corroborative of the statement of the public men that appeared in the newspapers. From Bhola (Barisal), a correspondent wrote on December 11, 1943, that there had been no less than 40,000 deaths owing to malaria, dysentery and starvation. In Chittagong town 3,000 died in the last five months (from December 22) out of a total of 30,000. "Out of 21 lakhs, two to two, and a half lakhs have already died and about two lakhs more are almost on the verge of death in the Noakhali district" reported a correspondent on December 21, 1943. In Nilphamari (Rungpur) and Kandi (Murshidabad) the number of people reported to have died exceed 50,000 in each sub-division up to the third week of December. In the Faridpur district, 5,46,971 people were affected by malaria during the five months preceding December 23, out of which 30,057 died. An unofficial estimate placed the number of deaths in Munshiganj (Dacca) at over 60,000 from starvation and allied causes up to December 23, 1943. From each district poured forth news of such disquieting character of mass death and destitution. The number of people at feeding centres exceeded 2,233,000 for each day according to the New Delhi message of November 13, 1943. Grain was distributed to 200,000 persons and 50,000 more people 'were given cash doles regularly on the family basis'. How many times more were prevented by self-respect, incapacity and disease from appealing for public help or coming to the relief centres due to distance are not known. It will not be far wrong to say that not even 10 per cent of the total population escaped from one

or more effects of the famine. Said Major-General D. Stuart in a broadcast on December 4, 1943 :

The reports you have seen in the newspapers of the numbers requiring medical treatment and clothing, are not exaggerated. In the first place malnutrition coupled with the advent of the cold weather and shortage of personal clothing and blankets, has made a large percentage of the poorer people easy victims to malaria, cholera and pneumonia, which are rampant throughout a large number of civil districts.

It is hardly possible to ascertain the number of deaths due to want of medicine, clothing, shelter, that is everything that can save people rendered weak and emaciated from continued starvation.

Said Sir Bartle Frere, Governor of Bombay (1862-67) :

Men are death-stricken by famine long before they die. The effects of insufficient food long continued may shorten life after a period of some years, or it may be of some months or days. But invariably there is a point which is often reached long before death actually ensues, when not even the tenderest care and most scientific nursing can restore a sufficiency of vital energy to enable the sufferer to regain even apparent temporary health and strength. Add to this that the consequences of famine in death fevers and epidemics of various kinds are apt to be quite as fatal as the effects of the famine itself.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *On the Impending Bengal Famine* by Sir Bartle Frere (1874), quoted in *The Famine of 1770* by Mr. Hemendra Prasad Ghose, pp. 1-2.

## TREK TO THE TOWN

CALCUTTA, 'the Second City of the Empire', the 'City of Palaces', has a large population of 'paupers' who house themselves on the pavements, make it filthy and insanitary, earn their livelihood by begging or pilfering, scatter disease, and die in the streets. This population is a problem with the municipal corporation. A big and wealthy city like Calcutta willy-nilly supplies them with sustenance and also offers them certain latitude in carrying on their profession without much let or hindrance. It is their home and they would not leave it ; or if they ever do so during their stay, it would be through the benefits of 'ticketless travel'. They would then carry a little cash for their dependants living mostly outside the province, or encourage and induce the do-nothings of their fold to come down to the city and get initiated into the trade. This is a permanent feature of the city. Further, whenever there is scarcity in any place within a radius of 50 or 60 miles of Calcutta—the residents of those places wend their way to the town in the hope of tiding over the difficulty and going back when conditions in their village homes would permit. This enchanting dame, the city of Calcutta, attracts these vagrants by her reputation of wealth and munificence, shelters them in the parks and treats them in the hospitals as much as possible.

In 1943, the situation was much worse than what it had usually been on previous occasions and people, especially from the villages to the south of the city, began to gather into the town from the early part of May. They found a ready refuge in the streets. Others came to buy rice at 'controlled rates'. They too had nowhere to lay their heads and readily took refuge on the pavements. Their numbers began to swell like the flood waters of July till it seemed that the stream of these hapless visitors would never cease. They were a legion in the first week of July. "A morsel of rice, mother, only a handful," was the wailing that rent the sky of Calcutta eighteen hours

out of the twentyfour and indescribable scenes of misery and destitution were in evidence everywhere. 'Near the dustbins would be seen the awful sight of hundreds of hungry people rioting amongst themselves just to pick up a few particles of refuse and putrid foodstuff'. Living skeletons of starving humanity listlessly moved about in the streets, lanes and by-lanes ; some lay motionless out of sheer exhaustion, and some were icy cold at the touch of the wand of Death.

These people had once their homes. They had left the villages impelled by hunger and entered the death trap of Calcutta. "*They fled from their villages to escape the famine, but fell victims to it in the town.*" By July the situation had become desperate in Calcutta ; the few free kitchens started by 'the munificent and kind-hearted public' were trying to meet the situation with immeasurably low stock ; and the fact of this supply of 'gruel' from free kitchens being 'noised about', it attracted people in larger numbers from far-off villages and the destitute 'wanderers' thronged the city pavements in hundreds and thousands.

Sick starving people began to die and remain in the streets in such numbers and for so many days on end that it was not possible to overlook the situation with equanimity any longer. On July 22, 1943, the *Statesman* wrote :

Derelict people now-a-days are dying in the streets. What proportion of these consists of ordinarily diseased beggars, and what of half-starved waifs immigrants into the city owing to rural food shortage, comparatively prosperous citizens have no means of gauging. Not all the corpses are speedily removed.

People had been dying in the streets of Calcutta long before this note appeared in the newspaper. Their number swelled and due to the increasingly larger number of deaths day by day, the disposal of the dead bodies entailed considerable delay. As a result of this,

arrangements have been made, by the Commissioner of Police, to enlist a corpse removal staff with a closed van for removing dead bodies off the streets of Calcutta to the morgues with the minimum of delay,



stated a Press Note on August 3. In the meantime the 'Bengal Vagrancy Ordinance' for the removal of 'vagrants' from the streets was brought into force on July 31, 1943. On August 16, a plan for the admission of destitutes lying on the streets in a state of collapse into improvised hospitals was announced.

Figures for August 16 and 17, regarding the number of persons removed to hospitals, deaths amongst these, and dead bodies removed from the streets by the Police Corpse Disposal Squad and by the two non-official organisations, viz., the Hindu Satkar Samity and the Anjuman Mufidul Islam, were published on August 18, 1943. The following table will throw some light on the real condition of Calcutta from day to day. It will be found that on September 28, no less than 325 cases were admitted into the hospitals; 101 persons died in the hospitals on October 25, and in a single day, i.e., on October 27, 170 dead bodies were disposed of by the non-official relief organisations. [Table, pp. 115-16]

There are some facts regarding the death of destitutes in Calcutta which deserve special mention. The Government was in utter confusion as to the use of the nomenclature of the cause of death and classification of the dead according to the causes. After a period of twentyfour days, i.e., from August 1 to September 8, of the publication of figures relating to famine and famine deaths, the Government of Bengal discovered that "death in the majority of cases was due to chronic ailments and diseases which had been neglected in the past" and stopped supplying figures to the newspapers on September 9, 1943. Due to the pressure of public opinion, the Government had to yield and figures began to reappear from September 11. In this connection the Government coined a word of great significance, viz., 'sick destitutes'. It meant, in other words, that death was due to starvation and nothing else, and from this day onward the number of deaths as given out by the Government represented deaths from hunger and absence of every kind of food and nutrition till death ensued.<sup>1</sup>

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1 On the topic of discontinuing publication of statistics regarding

On December 16, 1943, Mr. Amery informed the members of the House of Commons that,

The figures for Calcutta for the period August to December 11, 1943, were: admission to hospitals of starving persons 16,285, deaths 6,136. In addition, during the period August to December 11, the number of bodies disposed of by police or non-official relief organisations in Calcutta was 9,216, but *this total may include some deaths not due to starvation.*

deaths, the *Statesman* wrote editorially on September 14, 1943, under the heading, "*Lessons in Secrecy*" :

'During the concluding two days of last week, . . . we were unable to publish our usual figures showing the number of people nearly moribund from starvation admitted to Calcutta hospitals. According to information supplied to us early on Sunday, the inability was to continue. The Bengal Government, we were told, was "considering" whether to issue a report weekly about starvation cases ; "no special advantage" was seen in permitting daily release of statistics ; and (though the Central Government's own order is the cause of newspapers' smaller size) we were coolly informed that the Press ought to find the saving of space consequent upon Governmental suppression of daily statistics "welcome".

'Later in the same day this policy was reversed. Statistics, it appears, are now to be regularly issued as before. The first set, relating to last Saturday, was published in our editions of September 13/14. We warmly welcome this intelligent decision. It is noteworthy however that they were not quite the same sort of statistics. The grim word starvation disappeared from the text, remaining only in our own headings ; instead, sufferers admitted to hospitals were dubbed "sick destitutes", and a laboured appendix contended that most of the 37 deaths on Saturday were due to chronic ailments "neglected in the past". This, which has been repeated in respect of Sunday's deaths, is almost on a par with last week's quaint effort by the Chief Secretary of Orissa to gloss over ugly realities ; he is reported to have argued at a Press conference that "in all except a few instances deaths were attributed not to actual starvation but to malnutrition and inability to obtain food of proper kind, resulting in dysentery and diarrhoea." Such fine Secretariat distinctions and essays in false optimism will not do ; instead of impressing a public grown tired of soothing Governmental assurances they merely irritate. Whether a man dies because he has eaten nothing, or not eaten enough or well, alters in no way the hard fact of death, nor the reality of widespread famine'.

*Table showing the 'Number of cases removed to Hospitals', 'Deaths in Hospitals' and 'Dead bodies removed from the Streets' from day to day from August 16 to December 31, 1943.*

Aug., 1943				Oct., 1943			
	No. of cases removed to Hospitals.	Deaths in Hospitals.	Dead bodies removed from streets.		No. of cases removed to Hospitals.	Deaths in Hospitals.	Dead bodies removed from streets.
		(from 13 to 17)					
16 \				22	222	51	49
17 /	127	12	120	23	137	56	52
18	129	9	(a)	24	236	52	40
19	181	8	"	25	247	54	24
20	160	19	"	26	156	53	54
21	48	8	"	27	207	74	43
22	20	12 (b)	18	28	325	81	34 (s)
23	39	7 (b)	24	29	234	71	36 (s)
24	67	7 (b)	14	30	191	68	38 (s)
25	45	14	(a)				
26	76	21	"				
27	83	29	"				
28	not reported		28				
29	103	23	40	1	173	70	104
30	85	24	39	2	214	72	130
31	137	25	19	3	207	92	109
				4	203	79	138
Sept., 1943				5	184	66	103
1	113	19	15	6	182	73	83
2	135	30	(a)	7	135	78	90
3	153	28	"	8	181	59	116
4	177	36	"	9	195	66	96
5	131	30	12	10	195	66	96
6	156	26	20	11	240	75	115
7	175	46	(a)	12	184	86	117
8	156	36	9	13	115	83	94
9	(c)	(c)	53 (d)	14	233	82	115
10	(c)	(c)	77 (d)	15	181	78	73
11	134	37	15	16	192	85	141
12	128	39	36	17	201	90	118
13	152	49	46	18	197	85	123
14	198	42	43	19	191	91	104
15	200	56	39	20	230	90	117
16	196	39	32	21	203	83	90
17	141	58	28	22	188	81	122
18	195	50	41	23	199	86	100
19	249	58	37	24	233	66	78
20	171	55	39	25	172	101	100
21	221	47	46	26	190	97	170
				27	180	88	102

(a) Not reported.

(b) Deaths in the Campbell Hospital not reported.

(c) Publication stopped by the Government.

(d) Subsequently released.

(s) Not reported. The figures are estimates of the *Statesman*.

*Table showing the 'Number of cases removed to Hospitals', 'Deaths in Hospitals' and 'Dead bodies removed from the Streets' from day to day from August 16 to December 31, 1943—(Contd.)*

	No. of cases re- moved to Hos- pitals.	Deaths in Hos- pitals.	Dead bodies re- moved from streets.		No. of cases re- moved to Hos- pitals.	Deaths in Hos- pitals.	Dead bodies re- moved from streets.
28	182	80	106	29	74	44	38
29	165	86	104	30	83	57	41
30	198	91	115	Dec., 1943 (B)			
31	208	85	94	1	55	34	58
Nov., 1943 (A)				2	77	24	30
1	178	76	85	3	32	27	35
2	168	84	103	4	44	21	34
3	166	67	95	5	52	33	23
4	137	76	84	6	26	36	41
5	162	66	81	7	50	29	41
6	134	69	77	8	39	31	42
7	110	59	91	9	67	40	44
8	118	65	67	10	47	33	22
9	123	71	76	11	53	67	43
10	112	75	79	12	57	20	40
11	93	54	73	13	27	29	35
12	85	67	80	14	36	22	29
13	99	66	67	15	23	21	37
14	101	68	65	16	30	28	24
15	106	57	61	18	48	23	24
16	108	59	85	19	28	15	30
17	110	56	50	20	36	28	30
18	93	52	81	21	77	21	17
19	83	32	52	(C)			
20	102	37	57	22	64	19	31
21	72	44	36	23	49	12	17
22	94	39	51	24	24	27	18
23	96	44	50	25	not available		
24	88	56	70	26	39	19	(a)
25	70	46	65	27	21	16	(a)
26	73	37	43	28	24	24	(a)
27	78	26	51	29	20	17	(a)
28	71	46	42	30	25	13	(a)
				31	37	22	(a)

(A) From August 18 to November, 1943, the total number of admissions in hospitals was 12,559; out of these 4,120 died and the total number of dead bodies picked up from the streets and disposed of by Relief Organisations was 6,779.

(B) From August 18 to December 1, 1943, the number of admissions to hospitals totalled 15,746; out of these 5,812 died. The non-official Relief Organisations disposed of 8,803 dead bodies picked up from the streets.

(C) Up to Dec. 22, 1943, the number of total admissions in hospitals was 16,675; deaths amongst these were 6,399. The non-official Relief Organisations disposed of 9,513 dead bodies. The Calcutta Corporation dealt with 16,386 dead paupers since August 1, 1943.

The real fact was something different from what the Government wanted the people to believe. The figures supplied by the Corporation of Calcutta for "death from all causes" and deaths of paupers given separately, disclosed the ugly fact that a large number of persons had been dying in the city footpaths, (mostly for want of food), unattended, without any friend or relatives and without any means for the performance of their last rites.

The following table will give some idea of deaths of 'paupers' in the city from August to December, 1943 :

*Table showing deaths within the limits of the city of Calcutta from all causes and deaths of 'paupers' shown separately from August to December, 1943, week by week.*

Week ending	Total deaths from all causes.	No. of paupers dead.
7.8.43	939	264
14.8.43	1,057	309
21.8.43	1,129	339
28.8.43	1,159	402
<i>Total</i>	4,284	1,314
4.9.43	1,183	409
11.9.43	1,292	496
18.9.43	1,319	583
25.9.43	1,492	697
<i>Total</i>	5,286	2,185
2.10.43	1,636	1,059
9.10.43	1,967	1,057
16.10.43	2,154	1,224
23.10.43	2,155	1,152
30.10.43	2,214	1,283
<i>Total</i>	10,126	5,775
6.11.43	1,875	754
13.11.43	1,960	645
20.11.43	1,700	507
27.11.43	1,728	527
<i>Total</i>	7,263	2,433
4.12.43	1,599	450
11.12.43	1,806	351
18.12.43	1,405	345
25.12.43	1,214	260
<i>Total</i>	6,024	1,406
<i>Total</i>	32,983	13,113

On August 28, in an informal conference of the Hon'ble Ministers of the Bengal Cabinet it was decided to remove the destitutes from the city and on September 3, 1943, it was an-

nounced that arrangements had been completed to remove the first batch from the streets to their homes in their respective villages or 'homes' started here and there by the Government at places far away from Calcutta.

The dead bodies in burning ghats of Calcutta were kept in stacks for days for want of space for cremation. The scene was pathetic and the stench emanating from the corpses, horrible. Human bodies were unloaded from lorries with the utmost unconcern and even the care that is bestowed on logs in the process of unloading was absent. The condition of Calcutta and the mofussil was depicted by Mr. Syed Badrudduja, the then Mayor of Calcutta, in his appeal for help on September 8, 1943, in the following language :

The tragedy of 1770 seems to be enacted once more in Bengal with all its horrors. Bengal has never since been faced with a disaster so terrible, a crisis so acute. It deepens the gloom in the minds of the sincerest well wishers of the country that hundreds and thousands should be dying of starvation in the streets of Calcutta, as also in the rural areas of Bengal. In panic and despair hungry mothers from the mofussil with suckling babies in their bosom, famished fathers with starving children in their arms, have streamed into the city of Calcutta in search of a few morsels of food. Men, women and children, struggling for their very existence have very often been found picking up refuse from the dustbins in the city, just to keep up their miserable life which is fast flickering out. Many a time man and dog have fought over the same bit of food across the streets. Our mothers and sisters appear today in tattered clothes in search of food—clothes hardly sufficient to cover their shame ; their sense and sensibility have been completely deadened by this unprecedented calamity, the magnitude of which can hardly be fathomed away from actual scenes. Such tragic scenes of human miseries lend additional pathos to the situation when we discover mother struggling between life and death, silently disappearing in the cold shade of death, leaving helpless starving children to present a horrible picture of gloom and despair.

Far away in the distant mofussil, unfortunate children of the soil are, however, silently facing death raising a piteous wail and lamentation that spreads sombre gloom all round. What intense agonies and poignant tortures must have wrung the hearts of those miserable specimens

of human skeletons for days and weeks, before they succumb to their inevitable death. Their condition is so poor, so heart-rending that it has very rightly produced the deepest impression on the public mind far and wide.

On October 28, 1943, the Governor of Bengal promulgated the Bengal Destitute Persons (Repatriation and Relief) Ordinance to deal with destitutes roaming in Calcutta and other urban areas in the province. The Ordinance empowered

any officer authorized by Government to apprehend any person who, in the opinion of such officer, is a destitute, and detain him or her in a place provided for the purpose until the person is repatriated.

The streets of Calcutta were cleared of these 'intruders' almost by force and their number according to Government was 43,500 from October 30, 1943 to January 1944. Others left the city of their own accord simply to avoid experience of the happy 'homes' or centres started by the Government ; or being arrested and 'repatriated' to villages situated some hundreds of miles away from that of their own. Gradually Calcutta wore a superficially calm atmosphere and the distressing street scenes and sights having disappeared, the famine of Bengal, according to Government, Provincial, Indian or Home, as if by magic, vanished into thin air.

## BRITAIN'S CONCERN

SINCE April 1943, or even from an earlier period, Bengal had been passing through 'an unprecedented famine in living memory'. The British Government with which lies the final responsibility for the good governance of India was watching the developments from a distance and must have been greatly worried over the worse turn the famine had been taking from day to day in India. The British Parliament, the ultimate authority on every matter of moment in the British Empire, met on September 23, 1943, and the Reuter reported that

The first official statement on Bengal's food situation since reports of deaths from starvation in Calcutta have reached London, was made by Mr. L. S. Amery, Secretary of State for India, in the House of Commons today. *Intense interest was shown by Members who flocked into the House to hear Government's view and the steps being taken to overcome the crisis. A number of questions were put.*

On October 12, 1943, the House of Commons again discussed the food situation in India and the Reuter reported that

Mr. Leopold Amery, Secretary of State for India, *aroused the keenest interest* in the House of Commons today when he made his second statement on the Bengal food crisis.

The Lords debated the Bengal food situation on October 20, 1943, and this was followed by the House of Commons on the 28th. The Reuter reported the next debate in the following terms :

After reading for many days past the harrowing account of distress caused by the Bengal famine, Members of Parliament assembled today (Thursday, the 4th November, 1943) to debate the situation....*The attendance, both on the floor of the House and in the galleries was mainly composed of people with special interest in India. Mrs. Amery, wife of the Secretary of State, was in the Speaker's gallery.*



The people of Bengal felt much elated with joy over the news of Members of the British Parliament taking sometimes 'intense' and sometimes 'keenest' interest in India's food situation, and 'flocking into the House' to hear the Government's view on the matter and the measures taken by the Government to overcome the famine.

In India, it was a happy news that the "*attendance, both on the floor of the house and in the galleries were mainly composed of people with special interest in India*". The Indians had had no idea about the number of such Hon'ble Members of the British Parliament and the august visitors in the galleries "taking special interest" until Dr. M. R. Jayakar issued the following statement on November 10, 1943 :

*I would like the fact to be more widely known in India, for few newspapers have reported it, that at the last debate in the House of Commons on the Indian food question, the attendance of Members varied from 35 to 53 out of a total of 600 and odd.*

*Mr. Churchill, who manages to be present in the House when fate of the smallest country in Europe is concerned, could find no time to be present or to participate in the debate which concerned the fate of four hundred millions of his fellow subjects.*

*This knocks the bottom out of the old superstition that these 600 and odd men could govern India from 7,000 miles away. Is it not time that this Punch and Judy show was ended? What Hecuba to him and he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?*

After reading this statement it became absolutely clear that the sessions of Parliament over Indian food situation were mere farces, that the debates were hollow and that the whole show or concern of the British Government for Indian famine a perfect camouflage or a smokescreen for deceiving the people of the entire civilized world.

## SIDELIGHTS

### 1. *Ignorance or What ?*

A lack of the sense of responsibility in high quarters pervaded the whole official machinery for famine relief in Bengal, and this was particularly noticeable in the actions and utterances of the Hon'ble Ministers of the Bengal Cabinet. It is all the more regrettable that high officials should try to shake off responsibility under cover of feigned ignorance. The case of Munshiganj in Dacca and the remarks of the Hon'ble the Minister for Civil Supplies, Mr. Suhrawardy, thereon is typical of hundreds of other cases and may be taken into consideration.

As early as September 16, 1943, the *United Press* reported death of about 50 persons in the sub-division.

On September 19, the same news agency reported :

In rural areas the number of deaths from starvation has increased considerably. As no wood fuel is available, the dead bodies cannot be cremated and are thrown into the water.

According to the local correspondent of the *Hindusthan Standard*, published on September 21, 1943,

figures for death in rural areas would, up-to-date, exceed 1,000.

On September 26, the *United Press* reported :

The dead body of a male destitute was found on the 23rd morning near the compound of the Haraganga College. The body was partly devoured by some animal.

On September 30, the *United Press* again reported that there were

three deaths on September 26 and two more on the 27th morning.

On October 11, it was reported by a correspondent to the newspapers that

the critical rice situation at Munshiganj sub-division remains unchanged.

On October 23 (published in the Calcutta newspapers on October 25) a correspondent wrote :

In spite of the relief measures, the death-rate is appalling and it is reported that of 7 lakhs of population in the sub-division the total number of deaths either directly from starvation or from after-effects of starvation has already exceeded 5,000.

An appeal in the form of an advertisement, by the Munshiganj (Dacca) Central Relief Committee, measuring  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$  inches, appeared in the Calcutta newspapers on October 24, with headlines in very bold types, stating :

The inhabitants of Munshiganj sub-division are amongst the worst sufferers. They are now extremely in distress for want of food and clothing. Starvation is taking toll of men, women and children by thousands. The situation is being aggravated very quickly by the outbreak of epidemic as these famished people have lost all power of resistance. The unfortunate people have sold all their belongings, their homestead, but have not been able to solve their acute distress.

This appeal was signed by the Patron, the President and the Secretary, respectively, of the Committee.

The diary of events for November 1943, collected from the *United Press* messages published in the press from time to time reads like this :

November 1 :

Cholera, malaria, dysentery and smallpox have broken out throughout the sub-division. Owing to inadequate supply of medicine, it is difficult to cope with the situation. During the last four days, 25th to 28th Oct., there had been 9 cases of deaths in the town area alone due to starvation.

November 4 :

There were four deaths on November 2 among the destitutes in the Munshiganj town.

*A dying man was seen in front of the Local Muktears' Library being devoured by jackals and dogs. The man died shortly after.*

Arrangements have been made to bury the dead bodies, irrespective of caste or creed.

Reports from the interior rural areas indicate that the people there are dying in large numbers without any care and treatment.

November 13 :

During November 8 and 9 there were 8 deaths among the destitutes in Munshiganj town...

In the rural areas in the sub-division it is reported that a large number of people are dying daily due to continued starvation, malnutrition and malaria and the death-rate has increased in November. According to unofficial reports, about 15,000 people have died in Munshiganj sub-division so far due to starvation and allied causes.

On November 20, a correspondent of the *Hindusthan Standard* wrote (published on November 22) :

A public meeting was held at Munshiganj in the local Bar Library Hall on the 18th November to discuss the grave food situation and outbreak of malaria and other epidemics in the sub-division and resolutions urging on the authorities to make adequate and prompt supply of foodstuffs at the controlled rate and for free distribution of quinine and cholera vaccine were passed...

The sub-division of Munshiganj is the worst affected area in the district inhabited by nine lacs of people the majority of whom are landless and non-agriculturists and depend entirely on outside supply during the whole year. The allotment made to the sub-division is reported to be very inadequate in comparison with its dire necessity. Here from starvation and after effects of starvation and malnutrition about 20,000 people are reported to have already died and unless prompt and adequate supplies are made the situation will further aggravate with a heavy death rate.

On November 28, the S. D. O. told the *United Press*

that his estimate of starvation deaths in the sub-division so far would be *fifteen thousand. Deaths due to starvation, malaria and other diseases might be over forty thousand...* He further observed that the people had been so much devitalised that most of the cases removed to hospitals were proving fatal.

During a visit to the Munshiganj sub-division, on December 2, 1943, Mr. Suhrawardy, the Hon'ble the Civil Supplies Minister of Bengal,

was shocked to see the distress of the people of Munshiganj sub-division, but *he regretted report of the acute condition did not reach Government in time. He did not know that the real situation was so serious.*

It is passing strange that the Hon'ble Minister did not read the newspapers for two months or more ; that there was no intelligence service to report the conditions of the districts and sub-divisions of the province to him ; or that the local officers did not, in the course of the normal discharge of their duties, send reports to the Secretariat of such a serious condition of famine prevailing in the sub-division for months together. In any case, it proves, if it proves anything, that the officers in charge of the Department, from top to bottom, were thoroughly incompetent and inefficient for the high posts they were occupying. Their conduct disclosed a callous disregard for the lives and wellbeing of the people placed in their charge. Such an irresponsible act was only possible under a Government where individual and personal liability had not been fixed upon an officer for failing in the discharge of the primary duties attached to his post.

## II. *Unabashed :*

The people all over Bengal, particularly those of Calcutta, were being supplied with inedible rice, *i.e.*, rice containing dust and stone chips, the sweepings of farmyards, husk, broken rice, worm-eaten particles of rice, etc., from the days (May-June) when shops or centres were opened by the Government of Bengal for the sale of one seer of rice to a limited number of persons each. This bad rice either for sale or for distribution was soon noticeable in every part of Bengal, and the people had to pay handsomely for securing this foodstuff in order to keep themselves alive. The whole country complained against the supply of the dirt-mixed weak, inedible rice, but to no effect.

The situation reached the climax when the *United Press* reported from Chandpur (published on October 27, 1943) that

a kind of 'grass seeds' has been supplied to the controlled shops in Chandpur town for sale to the ration card holders.

The *Statesman* wrote the following on adulterated rice under caption 'Black and White' on November 20, 1943 :

An element in the rice situation in Bengal has been and is the shockingly poor quality of much of the rice that is sold. This is a form of plundering the public on which frequent comment has been made in the Press and otherwise, but it has been obscured in a measure by the greater evils that in many places there has been hardly any rice to buy and the price is outrageous when there is. The condition of the rice is closely related to price, for even at Rs. 40 or Rs. 60 a maund it is not always a maund of rice that comes to hand for the money. We have ourselves examined rice bought at a good price in the open market, and concluded from what we found that in some specimens pebbles were more than 20% by weight, and dirt as much. That meant that the buyer paid a maund's price for 60% of a maund and had to go to the irritating trouble of picking the stones out and winnowing the dirt away.

The public has put up with a lot, but the scale of adulteration is breaking down its endurance. 'Fit for cattle', is the description one letter before us says of 'the kinds of rice obtainable at the authorized shops,' and it says that such varieties of rice were never sold in the Calcutta markets before ; were it not for the black market all classes 'including the highest' would have been forced to subsist on the authorized rice. Compliments to the black market have been few, but here is an assertion that when the quality of rice on sale is not properly supervised the black market has a supreme utility for many. In the black market, is the implication, you can get clean white rice ; in the authorized market you must be prepared to put up with black dirty rice. Where, asks one correspondent, is all the good stuff with which the markets formerly overflowed, and which presumably is still grown ? That is one of the thousand questions that suggest themselves in this crisis, and no one can answer. Gresham's Law, that bad coins drive good out of use, has no application to perishable goods. It might be supposed that with so large a part of the administrative machinery devoted to food problems half or quarter of an eye might be spared for the study of quality in what is brought to market. But rice is not the only commodity that attracts foreign bodies on its journey from producer to consumer, nor in Bengal the only province where the adulterator has a good time. And the man who puts stones and mud in rice is

not quite so low in the scale as the man who mixes plaster of Paris with wheaten flour to give it whiteness and weight.

A serious controversy arose between the Central Government and other Provincial Governments on the one hand and the Government of Bengal on the other as to the responsibility of each party in bringing the condemned foodstuff in the market.

On October 28, 1943, Mr. Suhrawardy, the Hon'ble the Civil Supplies Minister of Bengal, was shown, at Dacca, samples of rice that were being supplied, through the Mohalla Committee, to the people of the locality. Mr. Suhrawardy met this complaint with the remarks that,

he had to import that bad rice from other provinces and I had nothing to choose.

On January 25, 1944, he asked the press representatives to realise that they were getting their stuff from the Government of India.

On March 1, 1944, he said in the Bengal Council that

the bad rice which had been received from other Governments did not do credit either to their provinces or to the honesty of those gentlemen who had been entrusted with the task of procuring and sending rice to the Bengal Government.

Perhaps it was not very difficult to find out these "gentlemen who had been entrusted with the task of procuring and sending rice to the Bengal Government", but, so far as the public know, no such steps were taken. They were the employees of the Government of Bengal and it was certainly not very difficult to find out the culprits and bring them to book.

The Central Government pleaded 'not guilty' to this charge.

Asked by Mr. K. C. Neogy in the Legislative Assembly (Central) as 'to what did they think about the charge' preferred by the Hon'ble the Civil Supplies Minister of Bengal, Mr. Suhrawardy, against them, Sir J. P. Srivastava, the Food Member to the Government of India, said on February 7, 1944, that they 'did not know what to think of the charge' and added :

The fact of the matter is, that this was not brought to our notice when rice actually reached Bengal. It has been lying there for some time and it is difficult to determine where it came from at this stage.

Regarding what, if any, action had been taken in the matter, Sir Azizul Huque, the Hon'ble Member for Commerce, said on March 1, 1944 :

The foodstuffs at the point of despatch was the responsibility of the Bengal Government itself. As complaints were not made to the Government of India, at the time supply was received, it was not possible now to trace the source of supply.

The Bengal Government had to face a more nasty disclosure. On March 24, 1944, the Government of Orissa in a Press Note contradicted

the allegation made on the floor of the Bengal Assembly regarding supply of bad rice to Bengal from Orissa,

and stated :

It is alleged in particular that rice was mixed with stone dusts...The Government wish to make it clear that so far as they were aware there is no foundation for such allegation... Vague and verbal complaint was made by representatives of the Bengal Government... but no specific complaints backed by samples of the alleged bad quality of rice and other details... were made to this Government... Moreover under the arrangement with the Bengal Government, it is their responsibility to satisfy themselves as to the quality of rice before despatch.

The Government of Bengal was silenced by these grave counter charges of inefficiency, corruption and of taking cover under false pretences. But matters did not improve and the people continued to suffer.

### III. *Unmasked :*

In the middle of September the Government of Bengal preached to the famished people of Bengal that due to transport difficulties foodstuffs could not be brought into the Province. If anybody was to blame, it was the Railway authorities and the entire responsibility rested with them and the Bengal Government had no hand in the matter. (If that was



the case, why did not they resign ?). Unfortunately for the Civil Supplies Minister, Mr. Suhrawardy, the Railway authorities came out with big advertisements on September 23, 24 and 25, 1943, in all the newspapers, excerpts from which read as follows :

### “FOOD SHORTAGE

#### *Is Railway Transport to Blame ?*

#### STUDY THESE FACTS

Tonnages arriving in Calcutta area by East Indian Railway for six months January 1st to June 30th in the past three years.

		Foodgrains and Foodstuffs	Sugar
1941	...	180,212 tons	20,869 tons
1942	...	87,780 „	12,165 „
1943	...	204,226 „	26,952 „

#### *Have the Breaches Worsened the Situation ?*

#### LOOK AT THESE FIGURES

Average daily arrivals of foodgrains and foodstuffs by B. N. and E. I. Rlys. for August 1943.

		Daily average No. of Wagons	Normal daily average
E. I. R.	...	138	114
Sept. 1st to 12th (12 days)	...	206	114
B. N. R.	...	28	15

#### MORE FACTS

\* \* \* \*

#### THEY ARE WASTING TRANSPORT

Booking of foodgrains and foodstuffs from the Punjab *was never stopped*. The quota was 50 wagons per day before the breaches and has been raised to 60 and later to 80 wagons during the period of the breaches. Booking to a quota of 30 wagons from the O. & T. Railway and unrestricted booking from stations on the

E. I. Rly. was only stopped when the breaches occurred from July 17th to July 21st.

EAST INDIAN RAILWAY."

(The fact of the matter is that the Government of Bengal allowed more than twenty-five per cent of the foodstuffs imported from outside provinces to be absorbed by the big business concerns in and around Calcutta to the exclusion of mofussil districts, where people had been dying in thousands for want of food).

Great interest was created in the public mind on the railways pleading their case through these advertisements in the Calcutta newspapers. The Government of Bengal, through its undaunted Civil Supplies Minister, spoke out in the Bengal Council on September 24, 1943, in anger and dismay.

Mr. Suhrawardy "did not know why the Railways had done so (made this ugly disclosure) except probably to exculpate themselves at the bar of public opinion, or perhaps still higher authorities.

It was decided between the Railways and ourselves that there would be no such further talk in future and that no opportunity would be given to create an atmosphere either against the Railways or against the Government. *It is a pity that the Railways have broken the agreement which was arrived at between us.*

There was a further report of a bout between the Bengal and the Central Governments over the supply of wagons for the movement of foodgrains. On February 1, 1944, serious allegations were made in the Bengal Assembly about wastage of rice in the Botanical Gardens and at several station platforms in the Jessore District. In reply to this charge Mr. Suhrawardy, the Civil Supplies Minister, "referring to the stacks of paddy that were lying on the Jessore railway platforms," said that "they had been trying to move them but they did not succeed because they could not get wagons."

If wagons or other means of transport were not available, was it not worse than useless to procure these grains from the villages and to allow them to rot on station platforms? But there was something more than what could be made known to

the public. Sir Edward Benthall, the Transport Member to the Government of India, said on February 28, 1944, in the Central Legislative Assembly :

Movements of foodgrains in Bengal are arranged in accordance with programmes prepared by the Bengal Government and this paddy was not included in these programmes.

Perhaps this revelation was more than what the Hon'ble Minister had expected.

#### IV. *Fact vs. Fiction* :

The following appeared on May 3, 1943, as an advertisement inserted by the Civil Supplies Department, in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* as an explanatory note under a picture *On Calcutta's Kitchen Front* showing a housewife preparing *chapatties* for her family :

As a result of arrangements made by Government, large stocks of wheat have been arriving from Empire countries and plenty of *atta* is now available in the bazar at controlled prices.

This was in May 1943. On October 16, 1943, Sir J. P. Srivastava, the Food Member to the Government of India said at a Food Conference in New Delhi "that the *first ship of food-grains* from abroad *was already unloading* at an Indian port and the second ship was expected to arrive at any moment." The second ship arrived on October 21, 1943. How was it that the Government proclaimed in the month of May, i.e., nearly six months before the actual arrival of wheat in India, that 'large stocks of wheat have been arriving in Indian ports'?<sup>1</sup> This showed the 'mood' of the minister in a 'tense' atmosphere.

1 Cf. the statement of Mr. B. R. Sen at p. 36.

## NINETEEN HUNDRED FORTY-FOUR

THE bumper 'aman' crop of 1944 has not brought the expected relief to the starving people of Bengal. We were told that there would be enough for all and for that reason one should not lose heart. It was a cheering message and the people would be most unwilling to give up this hope unless stern facts force them to do so.

What is the actual position with regard to the demand on and supply of rice within the province of Bengal ? The 'aman' crop is said to have yielded 8,333,000 tons. With regard to the 'aus' crop nothing is known for certain. Conflicting estimates have been put forward by eminent authorities. On August 13, 1943, Mr. Wood, the then Secretary, Food Department, Government of India, said in the Council of State that

the *aus* crop, if shared at one lb. per head per day, will provide fully for the rice requirement of the whole people of Bengal for upwards of 90 days.

This estimate gives us a total crop of 2·4 million tons. On October 8, Sir Thomas Rutherford, the then acting Governor of Bengal, in a broadcast speech said that it was 1·8 million tons. The Department of Agriculture, Bengal, on January 6, 1944, placed it at 3 million tons. Accepting it as 3 million tons, which, on the face of it is absurd, the total crop is estimated at a little over 11 million tons. But Mr. Sen, the Director-General of Food to the Government of India, was pleased to place it at 10 million tons in his speech in the Council of State on November 19, 1943. He further said that

the average annual requirements of rice in Bengal including imports, were 8·86 million tons,

and with the total crop of the year "there should not be any scarcity in Bengal in 1944".

We have to take other factors into account in support of Mr. B. R. Sen's theory of sufficiency. The Central Government has

taken the charge of feeding 3,000,000 or 4·8% of the population of Bengal. The estimate is 640,000 tons of grains for 13 months.

The number of people who died in 1943 has been estimated at between 35 to 45 lakhs and there would be a saving of about 400,000 tons of foodstuffs on this score. Export of foodgrains from Bengal has been stopped and the present ruling prices of rice will keep consumption and wastage down to the lowest limit.

Taking all these facts into consideration the present high price of rice, viz., Rs. 15 to Rs. 20 per maund, is not at all justified. The average people are passing through great distress. Those who cannot buy rice at such a price and die of starvation, have died in the last year's famine, and for this reason one does not find dead bodies on the streets of mofussil towns at the present moment.

If the food problem of 1944 is to be tackled properly, it is imperative that the real cause of the present high price should be explored without further delay.

One of the reasons for the present high price of rice is that there must have been some defect in the estimates of the yield of the total crop for 1944. With a crop of over 10 million tons for the year, the market would have been flooded with rice and it would have been by this time necessary for the Government to fix a minimum price for paddy and rice to save the producers from serious loss. Then the estimate of the total requirements of the province should be revised in the light of past experience. For consumption alone, 9·5 million tons are required on the basis of 344 lbs. of rice per capita per annum of 62·4 million people of the province.<sup>1</sup> By a second method of calculation we arrive at the same figure, i.e., about 9·5 million tons. If the total population of 62·4 million consisting of children of all ages, widows taking one meal a day, persons taking rice once a day and supplementing their diet with other cereals, be converted to total adult population taking rice meals twice a day, we get a population of 46·76 million souls. At the rate of 5·5

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1 See Appendix

mds., which is quite an under-estimate, per capita per annum, we require 257,500,000 maunds or 9·37 million tons of rice. There has been practically no 'carry over' from 1943. The seed requirements, normally, are 376,000 tons. It would certainly require a little more if the 'Grow More Food' campaign is to be translated into action. Normal storage, even computed at 16 seers per capita, the minimum quantity that has been allowed by the Government of Bengal to the people of Calcutta and the suburbs to keep in stock, will require 873,000 tons. It can be safely said that the village people with the memory of last year's experience will try to keep away from the market as much quantity as possible with the result that there would be a smaller quantity available for purchase by the people who are not growers.<sup>1</sup> Mr. P. J. Griffiths was right when, "referring to householders who load up stocks of food", he said in London on February 15, that "it is difficult to condemn the ordinary householder for what he might well regard as common prudence". When all these factors are taken together it is not difficult to guess the reasons for the high price of rice even when a bumper crop has just been harvested.

It is high time to think of the proper remedy when the country is passing through a severe scarcity of food. The first thing, still necessary is to create confidence in the minds of the people that Government have sufficient resources to meet any emergency consequent upon the producers refusing to bring their commodities in the market. It means that Government would go on importing wheat from foreign countries and keep the people informed of such imports. It is not by itself sufficient to create stocks in the hands of the Government only, but that there should be free movement of grains to the deficit

1 On March 16, 1944, Mr. B. R. Sen, the Director General of Food, Government of India, said in the Council of State : \* \* \* "The cultivators appeared to be holding on to their crop as they had never done before—unlike last year it was the cultivators and not traders or middlemen. It was estimated that in spite of the weight of the crop in the surplus area and Government procurement agency proceeding cautiously and slowly..., in no district had they brought into the market more than 50 per cent of what they would normally have brought up to this time of the year. In several districts it was much less than 25 per cent...."

province at the slightest manifestation of scarcity. In other words, transport facilities should be easy and swift. This should be done even at the sacrifice of the movement of war materials from place to place. Petrol should be freely given to lorries carrying essential foodstuffs as they are done in the case of 'essential war materials' and no distinction should be made between the two. It is wrong to think that weapons for killing the enemy are more necessary than food that can keep its own people alive.

The quality of rice supplied to the people of the province, especially to the people of Calcutta and the suburbs, should be improved at once. There is going to be a nutrition deficiency not only amongst the civil population but also amongst the 'essential labour' population in the factories and workshops. The supply of bad rice has caused serious misgivings in the minds of the people about the Government's capacity to feed the people throughout the year. It has given rise to the idea that the stocks with the Government are not only poor in quality but also inadequate in quantity. It has also encouraged the people to store for evil days.

The Government should themselves be conversant with the actual position within the country and should not wait till they are suddenly overtaken by uncertainty and unpreparedness. The Hon'ble Mr. Suhrawardy said on April 27, 1944, at Lucknow that "no body can say" whether "rice grown in Bengal was sufficient to feed her population" and, therefore, they should try to ascertain, at least, the approximate requirements and would do well not to delude themselves with statistics of 'bumperness' which have been found to be thoroughly undependable by test in the past.

The policy of the Government of Bengal regarding the procurement of rice has not been taken very favourably by the public. There was a good deal of difference between the Central Government and the Government of Bengal

in the execution of the scheme as to the minimum load which could be placed on the Chief Agents

selected for the purchase of 'aman' crop from the districts.

On the urgent representation of the Bengal Government, the Government of India have decided not to over-ride the opinion of the Provincial Government on this point, *for which opinion the Bengal Government must and do accept full responsibility*, (Italics mine.)

disclosed a statement of the Food Member to the Government of India. What is the responsibility of the Bengal Government? And what are the ultimate effects if such responsibility, on a proper enquiry, be fixed upon them?

The ordinary trade channels have been thoroughly neglected in the procurement and supply of foodstuffs in the Province. If some of them, as Mr. Methold said in the Calcutta Corporation on February 9, 1944, had been guilty of creating black market in the past, it was wrong to besmirch all of them with one black dye and refuse to accept all offers of help from them. The Government of Bengal in its Civil Supplies Department, is guilty of much corruption and its Chief, the Hon'ble Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy said on September 24, 1943, in the Bengal Council :

that at the present moment the temptations were so great in the way of the officers that it was very difficult for them to surmount them. It was difficult to get officers to stand up to the temptations which could be offered by the trade.

It is a great blunder to keep away the private traders from doing their bit despite their past experience in the trade and their knowledge of the various local conditions— a lack of which may prove to be serious handicaps to those who have been newly recruited in the line. Everybody will agree with Mr. P. J. Griffiths, in what he has said in the speech referred to in an earlier portion of this article, *viz.*,

There are plenty of capable officials in the province but work of this kind involving purchasing and marketing operations is one to which the official is unaccustomed and to which in many cases it is difficult for him to adapt.

It would be unfortunate to disregard this advice.

The salvation lies in selecting men who enjoy the con-



fidence of the public and to entrust them with the task of finding out the real causes of the present price position of rice in Bengal, and suggest ways and means for inducing people to throw more rice into the market and thus bring down the price. It is useless to hoodwink the people by repeating untruths regarding falling prices, and the consequence of such untruths has been in the past the cause of shaken confidence in the Government. The leaders of the people now in detention, are the only competent persons for the undertaking of this great task and bringing it to a happy termination.

The Government's sensitiveness to public criticism of their food policy is rather unfortunate. They have consistently opposed all forms of discussion in public and they made a demonstration of their ire and authority in connection with certain articles that appeared in the first week of October 1943 in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*.

On February 14, 1944, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Chief Minister, Government of Bengal, said in the Bengal Legislative Assembly :

Government on October 8 last passed an order 'that any matter relating to economic conditions in Bengal, the food and supply situation, relief and distress and the Civil Supplies Defence Services or organisations should before being published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* till further orders, be submitted for scrutiny to the Special Press Adviser, Calcutta, and also by another order prohibited the printing or publishing within the Province of Bengal of documents containing a reference by way of comment or otherwise to the said order.

On February 22, 1944, the Food Secretary to the Government of India on his return to Delhi from a short visit to Bengal issued a statement in New Delhi deprecating "all attempts at 'taking Bengal into a second famine'." He further stated that "complacency or ill-considered optimism is one thing, but defeatism is another."

The leaders of the several parties in opposition in the Bengal Legislative Assembly headed by Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq issued a statement on February 27, 1944, dealing with the points raised by the Food Secretary. This was not allowed by the

Government to be published in the press. During a debate on the adjournment motion, on March 2, to discuss the banning of publication of the joint statement of the leaders in the Press, the statement was read out by the mover of the motion, Shri Kiran Sankar Roy, and it appeared in the newspapers on the next day. There was nothing to which any reasonable objection could be taken, nor was it ever contended that it subsequently produced any deleterious effect on the food situation of the province.

In replying to the debate, the Hon'ble Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin, the Premier of Bengal, disclosed Government's attitude on the matter and said that the Opposition were at liberty to criticise the Ministry as such but he would not allow any criticism of the food policy of his Government. In pursuance of this policy his Government passed orders on *Navayug* on March 24, 1944, asking them to submit all articles on food, etc. to the Press Adviser before publication.<sup>1</sup>

It would have been better for all concerned if the Government had found its way in allowing authentic news and reasonable comments on the food situation to appear in the

#### 1 ORDER ON NAVAYUG.

Government of Bengal  
Home (Press) Department

Dated Calcutta, the 24th March, 1944.  
*Order.*

In exercise of the power conferred by clause (a) of sub-rule (1) of rule 41 of the Defence of India Rules, the Governor is pleased, for the purpose of securing the public safety and the maintenance of public order, to order that any matter, relating to economic conditions in Bengal, the food and supply situation, relief and distress and the Civil Defence Services or organisations shall, before being published in the *Navajug* newspaper, till further orders be submitted for scrutiny to the Special Press Adviser, Calcutta.

Provided that nothing in this order shall be deemed to apply to—

- (a) any matter communicated to the Press for publication by the Government of Bengal or any other Government in India ;
- (b) any matter already submitted for press advice and 'passed press' by a press adviser in Bengal or elsewhere in India ; and
- (c) any matter constituting a actual report or actual news and published in type of the same size and face as are in general use for the presentation of news without display of any kind

By Order of the Governor,  
Additional Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal.

papers. It is desirable that the case of Munshiganj<sup>1</sup> should not be repeated again. The position would be a thousand times worse if publication of news and criticism of food policy of the Government is indiscriminately suppressed. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee read a report in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on March 29, 1944, from the Superintendent of Police to the Inspector General of Police, Burdwan Range, purported to have been written in the second week of March, to the effect that with regard to rice and small coins it appeared that the situation was going to be a repetition of the last year. Goes on the report :

Price of rice and paddy are on the increase and also are disappearing from the market.... There has been a continual complaint from the force of extremely rotten supply of rice from the Government Stores here.... The supply consists of a mixture of four different kinds of rice with a liberal addition of stones and the users are mostly suffering from stomach troubles.

Such is the report of a responsible officer of the Government who is in constant touch with the real situation in the villages. Non-official reports corroborate the police officer's.

The Hon'ble Ministers of the Bengal Cabinet are speaking in the language they used in 1943. On January 22, 1944, the Premier of Bengal, the Hon'ble Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin

expressed an optimistic view about the food situation, which he thought, would definitely improve in the near future.

The Hon'ble Mr. Tulsi Chandra Goswami, the Finance Minister said on March 1, 1944, in the Bengal Legislative Council :

I wish to declare from this House that notwithstanding what rumours may be current there shall be no famine in Bengal in 1944-45.

This was well and good. But through the muzzled press, news of famine incidents appear in the press at times. *The Associated Press* reported from Bogra, on March 20, 1944 published on the 23rd idem, that :

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<sup>1</sup> See "Sidelights", I, p. 122.

Batches of destitutes are again pouring into the town in a very weak state of health. The body of a destitute was found lying on the Rangpur road for some hours while another was seen being devoured by vultures and jackals on the station approach road.

On March 26, 1944, the local correspondent of the *Hindusthan Standard* wrote from Sarishabari (Mymensingh), published on March 30, that

A very tragic scene was witnessed today at the very heart of the Sarishabari town. The dead body of a destitute woman was found yesterday morning in a vacant house by the District Board road, off Sarishabari station. The body was seen lying all day long without any arrangement for removal. At night jackals dragged out the body and mostly devoured it up. The remaining part of the body is being devoured by dogs and crows in front of the eyes of hundreds of passers-by this morning.

It may be that hundreds of other incidents of this nature are taking place in the countryside. But the situation is much better than what it was in May-December 1943, but worse than what it was in January to April of the same year. It is strange that there should be such widespread distress at the present moment. The new Governor of Bengal, His Excellency, Mr. Richard Gardiner Casey, in a broadcast speech from the Calcutta Radio Station, said on April 1, 1944 :

I am convinced that there is plenty of rice in Bengal for all the people of Bengal. The difficulty is that it is unevenly distributed—some districts have too much and others too little. Our task is to spread the butter evenly on the bread. To do so we have to buy part of the surplus from those who have more than they need and distribute it to those who have less than they need.

There is general agreement that the principal causes of last year's disaster were—a shortage of rice—the principal foodstuff of Bengal—poor crops, transport difficulties, the inevitable economic dislocation of war, and a general administration which had never been designed to meet the very abnormal problems with which it was so suddenly faced.

According to His Excellency there is a bumper crop this year and there need be no anxiety over that. All other defects and shortcomings have been either remedied or removed. For these

reasons His Excellency was "prompted to say that there should be no recurrence of famine in Bengal in 1944". He spoke about the plans of rehabilitation of public health and economic condition of the people and declared "the moral responsibility (of the Government) to do *our* utmost for the tens of millions of Bengalis who cannot help themselves", who are poor "and live in great simplicity and largely depend for their well or ill being on the bounty of nature".

"What about moral rehabilitation?" and "What of those whose minds are still darkened by tragedy, who have lost confidence in themselves, in the future, and in our ability to prevent what has happened happening again",—asked His Excellency; and he answered the question himself in the following language:

I do not say that a feeling of pessimism is altogether unnatural. But I do say that it is unjustified. I look to the future with confidence and I appeal for confidence in the administration of which I am the head—for confidence in the determination and ability of Government to prevent another catastrophe. Given confidence our path is straight and our goal is clear.

Let us hope that His Excellency will prove to be a true prophet and that he will be able to whip his administration into a proper sense of responsibility that affects the "well or ill being" of millions of His Majesty's subjects who have been placed in direct charge of His Excellency.<sup>1</sup>

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1 *The Statesman* wrote on April 2, 1944, under caption *A Governor's Forecast*, which represent the opinion of the whole province:

People in Bengal, whether Hindu, Muslim, or British, civilian or military, scan with vigilantly critical eye any hopeful forecasts about the Province's future economic state. The public mood on the subject throughout the rest of India and Britain is probably similar. For this the reasons are simple and sound. Memories remain fresh of the long dismal period last year when Authority in Calcutta, in New Delhi, and in London was profuse in subsequently falsified assurances that no serious danger impended, that enough food for harassed and bewildered Bengal and for India existed, and that the only need was greater trustfulness on the public's part and minor redistribution of stocks of grain.

Over-optimistic and provenly erroneous assertions such as these from persons presumably in a position to know the truth, have their inevitable psychological sequel. This would be true in any country; in India the effects are aggravated by complexities of politics among the intelligentsia and by illiteracy among the masses. Perhaps sentiment in and about Bengal, shaken by past official mistakes and infused with the peculiar local party rancours, is now over-gloomy about the present conditions and prospects. The pendulum may have swung too far into scepticism.

The price of everything that is necessary for human existence is selling at a very high price—a price far above the purchasing power of the people of Bengal. Some of the articles, such as oil,—mustard, cocoanut and kerosene,—sugar, fuel of every kind, cloth, agricultural and other implements, household utensils, building materials, drugs, etc., are only a few in a long list. The people have become exceedingly devitalised and have lost all power of resistance. Bengal is just passing through the ‘aftermath’ of the famine or it may more appropriately be said, that the famine of 1943 is still continuing. Reports of declining number of births with deaths mounting are now available from the mofussil districts. Statistics for Dacca will depict the real situation prevailing in other districts also. On March 29, 1944, the *Associated Press* reported that

22,866 persons died in the district of Dacca in January, 1944, as compared with 7,194 deaths in January, 1943, according to official vital statistics. The total number of births registered in the district in January, 1944, was 4,938 as compared with 8,279 in January, 1943.

For February 1944, the *Associated Press* said on April 6 :

1,446 persons died in this city due to all causes in the month of February last as compared with 324 such deaths in February, 1943 and 248 in February, 1942.<sup>1</sup>

The real position does not admit of any complacency. The

At any rate the Province's able new Governor plainly thinks so, and his opinion carried weight, for he is of bigger administrative and political stature than any who of late years has presided over Bengal's destinies, and his variety of recent experience in other lands during times of stress gives his views objectivity. He has waited two prudent months before prophecy, and last night in a broadcast address of attractive candour and directness he declares that in his judgment there should be no recurrence of famine this year in Bengal. A man of his eminence with last year's miserable record of Governmental miscalculation spread before him would not so speak without basis ; and the several reasons he sets forth are substantial. We need not recapitulate them ;... we commend them to careful attention. They should help to restore much needed confidence.

Even before this important address the average man saw grounds for belief that Authority, if not yet ahead of the Bengal food problem, was at any rate almost level with it, instead of (as last year) stumbling unavailingly along three or four steps in the rear.... We can discern dangers of some magnitude ahead, but consider that this year with reasonable good fortune they may be surmounted."

1 Figures for the whole district : 1942—5,664 ; 1943—5,687 and 1944—17,325.

'Schemes' of the Government of Bengal are as numerous as the monsoon showers and if one per cent of the whole plan can be executed, it would mean a great deal. The heart, full of diffidence, quails to think of a recurrence of the famine. But there is hope that some beneficent measures<sup>1</sup> for preventing not only famine but all-round decadence of the Province would be taken ; and the history of famines in Bengal up to the fourth month of 1944 is closed with a mixed feeling of nervousness and faith regarding the future welfare of our motherland.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix.

## APPENDIX "A"

(1)

*Extracts from the statement of the Hon'ble Pandit H. N. Kunzru  
on the Famine Conditions in Contai, Tamluk and  
24-Parganas issued on October 15, 1943.*

"I arrived in Calcutta on October 4 and during the 10 days that I have been here I have seen something of the conditions of the people in various parts of Calcutta, the area round about the Diamond Harbour and a portion of that part of the Burdwan district which has been recently affected by the floods in the Damodar and portions of Contai and Tamluk sub-divisions of the Midnapur district.

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"Even in Calcutta I have come across sights which would haunt any one with least sympathy for his fellow beings. There is hardly any part of Calcutta visited by me where I have not seen human beings looking like corpses and starving wretches rummaging the dustbins and heaps of garbage for a few food-grains. But the horrors that I saw in the Contai and Tamluk sub-divisions are well-nigh indescribable.

"I was aware before I went there that the sub-divisions of Contai and Tamluk had suffered heavily from the cyclone and the floods last year and some parts of them were flooded this year also. Nevertheless, I was not prepared for the appalling situation that exists there. I do not want to exaggerate but I cannot help saying that Contai seemed to be a city of the dead. I came across a few dead bodies wherever I went and the women and the children presented a pitiable spectacle. In the villages that I saw the position was even worse than in the Contai town. The people seemed to be in the grip of death....

"In the Tamluk sub-division, which I understand is normally better than the Contai sub-division, the situation was not as bad as in the Contai sub-division, but even there the extent and



severity of the distress cannot be doubted. I saw corpses lying about both in Tamluk and in Mahishadal and in every village which I could visit in the limited time at my disposal. It was heart-rending to see women and children dying before one's eyes without being able to do anything to save them from death. I was credibly informed, in both the Contai and Tamluk subdivisions, that jackals and dogs had been attacking people in whom life was not quite extinct.

"The official view seems to be that deaths have occurred mostly among professional beggars. I cannot subscribe to this view. One must regard almost the entire population of Contai as consisting of professional beggars before one can accept it. The enquiries that I made showed that the majority of those who were piteously asking for alms consisted of people who owned a bit of land or landless labourers before the present disaster overtook them.

"Again we have been told on high authority that in the 24-Parganas and the Midnapur districts rice was on sale in practically every *hat* and petty grocer's shop. What I saw and the enquiries that I made compelled me to come to a different conclusion. Rice can be seen in small quantities in a few shops here and there, but it was not generally available. The poor people suffered not merely because of its absence. This was not merely my view, but also of those who take no part in politics and are not against either the British Government or the present Muslim League Ministry.

"When a whole province is affected even the Government may be unable to afford full relief to the people, but the severity of the distress that prevail makes one feel strongly that the authorities did not realise the seriousness of the situation early even when the terrible reality could not be ignored and the energetic measures demanded by the occasion were not taken.

"The non-official organisations in Calcutta and elsewhere have rendered yeoman's service to the people. ..The non-official organisations in Calcutta have no doubt obtained their supplies from Government, but this does not in any way detract from the beneficent character of their activities. Perhaps it would

*be true to say that their example has compelled the Government of Bengal to move faster than it would otherwise have, either in Calcutta or in the mofussil."*

(2)

*Extracts from the Speech of the Hon'ble Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru delivered at the University Institute Hall on October 15, 1943.*

"I have during the last 11 or 12 days seen with my own eyes something of the tragedy prevailing in Bengal which has stirred the whole country to its deepest depth and has created a profound anxiety even in England.... Nothing I can say can adequately describe the horrors of the situation and the miseries that I saw painted on the face of the people.

The sights that I have seen will, I think, haunt me as long as I live. I have seen women and children suffering uncomplainingly the agonies of starvation. I have seen little children, exhausted by want of food, laying their heads submissively to the ground never to raise them again. I have seen women and children deserted by their husbands and fathers and left to their fate because of their inability to support their dependants.

I have seen hospitals full of human beings looking like corpses and I have seen all this without being able to do the least bit in order to improve the condition of the people or to bring them some succour, some aid. I have often wondered when I entered a hospital whether many of those whom I saw before me and who were being attended to by doctors and nurses, would live and what their condition would be if they continued to live. They have lost their vitality to such an extent that we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that our troubles would be over as soon as the 'Aman' crop which promises to be plentiful has been harvested.

The doctors and nurses in hospitals are fighting death manfully, but they recognise, recognise sorrowfully, that the

problem that they have to deal with is not one of disease but that of starvation. I have not spoken to you yet of the corpses that met my eyes wherever I went—corpses, which I had been credibly informed, had lain in the same place for hours and hours.

I understand that the Hon'ble Minister (Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy) issued a statement the other day in which even at the present time when he and the Governor are appealing for the co-operation of all classes and parties, *has appealed to the peasants in the name of the Muslim League to desist from withholding foodgrains from the market. Could there be a greater tragedy for Bengal than the attitude of the Ministry which even in this tragic situation when it requires the help of everybody to come and support it, is appealing only to a section of the people and are rousing feelings detrimental to the best interests of the population of Bengal ?*

I have ventured to describe briefly my experiences to you and to tell you what I think of the manner in which the Government of Bengal is approaching the problem. But I must say, that notwithstanding the heavy responsibility of the Government of Bengal for the present situation, I think that the primary responsibility for the catastrophe which has overwhelmed Bengal and the sufferings of the people in some other parts of India is that of the British Government and the Government of India. Lord Linlithgow and Mr. Amery are primarily responsible for the deterioration which has taken place in the food situation....Had the British Government realised its primary duty to save the lives of the people and not to allow people to die indefinitely on the altar of Provincial Autonomy, the situation would have improved long ago....

Even if a hundredth part of what has happened in India had happened in England would the Churchill Government have remained in power? Even if a dozen people died of starvation the British public would have dealt with the Churchill Government as it deserved to be dealt with. Yet thousands of people have died in this country, without the British Government doing anything but expressing their lip sympathy

with the people and assuring that they and the Provincial Governments were fully alive to the urgency of the situation.... Had the British Government become conscious of its responsibility a few months earlier, Bengal would not have been in the grip of a famine for which there is no parallel in recent history.

We have a right, and a moral right, to ask that the British Government having been weighed in the balance and found wanting, should make its way for an Indian Government which with all its deficiencies will feel for its countrymen and realise its unity with the people, knowing that in their strength and prosperity lie its own strength and prosperity.”

## APPENDIX "B"

### *Statement of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee before the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 12th February, 1943.*

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I with your permission make a statement on the opening day of the Legislative Assembly dealing with the circumstances which led to my resignation as a Minister.... I felt compelled to resign first because I found that the continued policy of the British Government and the Government in this country was to ignore the claims of Indians to fuller political power, to hamper good government consistent with the true interests of the people and to weaken the forces of people's defence against enemy aggression.

It was not however merely on this all-India policy and its repurcussion in Bengal that I felt compelled to resign, but there were other circumstances which rendered it impossible for me to continue in office, consistent with my self-respect. For the first time in history of this province representatives of large sections of Hindus, Moslems and other communities combined to work the provincial constitution. I do not ignore that the opposition to-day represents a considerable section of Moslem opinion in Bengal and to me personally nothing would be of greater satisfaction than to see a combination of all the Indian elements in the legislature on the basis of a common programme to fight for the rights of the people in this critical period of the history of Bengal. In any case, even the combination that we had formed under the leadership of Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq proved something too bitter to be swallowed by a section of permanent officials in this province and by no less a person than the head of the provincial administration himself. British rule thrives in the eyes of the outer world on constant strifes between Hindus and Moslems. And even a partial unity on the part of members belonging to these two great communities served as a night-mare to those bureaucrats who held in their hands the real powers of administration.

Let me at this stage briefly refer to the fundamental features of the constitution that governs the administration of the province. Indian Ministers are trotted out as Mr. Amery's show-boys when foreign public opinion is to be soothed as regards the grand appearance of provincial autonomy in India. The world is reminded that the destinies of millions of Indians are in the hands of Indian ministers responsible to the legislature. The true fact however is that while ministers have large responsibilities and have to justify the conduct and administrative acts of themselves and of irresponsible bureaucrats before the legislature and the public, they have very little of real power which lies vested in the autocratic hands of the Governor of the province concerned. And the Governor has at his beck and call the services of a small coterie of unsympathetic and unimaginative civil servants, utterly oblivious of the real interests of the people of the province. Apart from important sections of the Government of India Act which entitle the Governor to act in his discretion or in the exercise of his individual judgment, Section 52 clothes him with special responsibilities which can be utilised by a reactionary Governor, acting in close association with his chosen officers, in a manner highly detrimental to the interests of the people....

During my experience as a Minister I found to my utter surprise that in many vital matters affecting the rights and liberty of the people, the advice tendered by the ministers was invariably subject to revision in the light of the counsel tendered by the more trusted members of the services whose omniscience was almost of a divine character....

In the matter of release of political prisoners the Ministers were anxious to pursue a policy which while fully consistent with the present war emergency would at the same time help to mobilise public opinion of all shades in favour of the defence of the province against Axis aggression. Whether the recommendations affected the general state policy or individual cases, systematic obstruction came from the permanent officials, whom ministers could not remove, ultimately backed by the support of the head of the provincial administration. The

revised scheme of Home Guards approved by the Council of Ministers, calculated to lay the foundation of a people's army, irrespective of caste, community or politics, was summarily rejected by the Governor inasmuch as the stalwarts of the department of law and order were not prepared to trust Bengalees to unite in the defence of their own motherland or in maintaining internal security. The present situation regarding food and supply of essential commodities has taken an acute turn. But here also the interfering hands of the Governor and the policy of his own selected officials whom the ministry was bound to accept, whether it liked them or not, have been mainly responsible for the lack of co-ordination and for the failure to draw up a comprehensive scheme for the relief of the people at large.

When the political disturbances due to the Congress decision in August had not broken out, the policy of combating the movement was outlined by the Government of India and such is the nature of responsible Government functioning in this unfortunate land that communication was not allowed to be placed before the Council of Ministers in spite of repeated demands made by the Chief Minister himself. A coterie of public servants could however see this document and they were ready with plans and proposals. But ministers were allowed access to it only after the policy had been given effect to by the Government of India on August 9, last. In the matter of appointments, an Indian Civil Servant, who was a Bengali, could easily be superseded by the decision of the Governor in spite of ministerial advice, on the plea that all appointments and transfers were to be made by the Governor acting in his own discretion under the Government of India Act. One may stop here and ask, is that discretion intended to be exercised only in favour of protecting the vested interests of chosen officers or the interest of members belonging to the Governor's own community? Another British Civil Servant had the audacity to put down in writing that the rates of payments made to the unfortunate evacuees of Eastern Bengal were much higher than what they deserved and as 'an Imperial officer',—

the words are not mine but his—(and who will dare say after this that Imperialism will ever die on the soil of India)—as an Imperial officer he refused to carry out the orders of the provincial government. This officer still remains in power and enjoys a position of great trust and responsibility. Cases of oppression have taken place and there has been a singular obstinacy on the part of the same coterie I have mentioned, to resist any enquiry into such allegations. A Bengali officer enjoying a comparatively subordinate status had the courage to complain about the high-handedness of the military in some area in Eastern Bengal and the wrath of the coterie fell on him and he was ordered a summary transfer. When higher officials oppressed the people and transfer and enquiry were demanded, prestige stood in the way and truth and justice had to be sacrificed at its altar. This state of demoralisation and open defiance of elementary canons of discipline are due to the support that the coterie expects to get over the head of the ministers themselves. Intimate consultation between Government House and the Secretariat behind the back of Ministers was a regular feature and very often the files themselves bore the evidence of carefully prepared designs for thwarting popular demands.

The history of imposition of collective fines is another chapter of deliberate violation of justice and fairplay. My comments on this matter were distorted in some quarters. The Hindus were singled out for mass punishment in respect of collective fines. I never suggested for a moment that the remedy was the inclusion of Moslems as a whole. My claim has been and is to-day that fines should be imposed only on persons who can be held to be guilty according to the provisions of the Ordinance. There should be no imposition based on communal considerations. Just as innocent Moslems should be excluded, so also innocent Hindus should be excluded, unless the policy of Government is to terrorise the Hindus as a community. We as ministers asked for the whole policy being reconsidered by Cabinet and demanded a correct application of the Ordinance in suitable cases. Would it surprise the Legislative Assembly to know that while the Governor was willing to have the matter



considered by Cabinet, he informed the ministers without any ambiguity that whatever Cabinet might decide, fines already imposed must be collected and the policy already adopted must continue. If necessary he was prepared to pass orders under his special responsibility.

The House will recall that in course of a recent discussion the Indian members of the legislature belonging to all groups pressed Government for liberalising the conditions for admission to the Army and for taking steps for organising a national militia which would be charged with the solemn duty of defending our hearth and home. The ministry unanimously advocated the creation of such a militia but there was systematic obstruction from higher quarters....

The Denial Policy and the schemes for compulsory evacuation for military purposes have caused the greatest possible hardship to thousands of poor people in Bengal. The Council of Ministers prepared a unanimous note indicating with sufficient clearness that the Denial Policy which was the outcome of a theory of defeatism could easily be avoided consistent with military requirements. That memorandum was not even forwarded to the Government of India and the advice of the ministers, though it ultimately secured some alteration in the detailed application of the policy, could not undo the total mischief which has caused an unprecedented social and economic disaster in many parts of Bengal.

Lastly, let me refer to Midnapur. I do not for a moment ignore that the political disturbances in some parts of this district were of a serious character. One can well understand any legitimate steps taken to combat lawlessness and open defiance of authority. But if a section of the people challenged Government, the local officers were themselves reported to have broken the basic canons of civilised administration and carried on a relentless campaign of repression, irrespective of the guilt of the people concerned. Shooting of innocent people, looting and destruction of property, instigating one community against the other, attacks on women, these were amongst the charges that reached us from various independent sources, many of

whom lent no support whatsoever to any subversive movement. Detailed information was handed over to us, including lists of houses that were raided and burnt by or under the direction of the police and the military. I handed over one such long list to some of the highest officials in the Home Department on the very day of the fateful cyclone of 16th October and urged them to see that the barbarous acts complained of came to a stop immediately. Then came the terrible blow from nature on 16th October last. One would have thought this natural catastrophe, which had caused such enormous destruction of life and property, would also serve to wash away all the bitterness and the sore from the minds of the officials and the local public alike and bind them together in a noble determination to alleviate human suffering. The callousness that I witnessed on the part of some of the officials from the highest to the lowest in the face of this terrible blow was something unparalleled in the annals of civilised administration. We have been taught to hate Nazi horrors. But the horrors of oppression under British rule that Bengal and India witnessed during the last five months compare very favourably with the reports that British propagandists circulate about Axis tortures in lands under their occupation.

My first charge about Midnapur is the criminal and deliberate delay in publishing the news of the havoc caused on 16th October. The Defence of India Rules have been misapplied in many directions. But a more disgraceful application of these rules has not taken place anywhere in India. The happy family of civil servants suppressed the news for nearly a fortnight. Even appeals for help were not allowed to see the light of the day. The explanation that was given was utterly devoid of justification. The fact remains that most valuable time was thus lost and people suffered and died for want of co-ordinated and organised relief. The District officer himself failed to rise equal to the occasion and his previous prejudice against the people, who were called rebels, prevented him from doing what

any responsible officer was bound to do to mitigate the sufferings of the people. Some roads were cleared by him and he took some further action. But his frame of mind was made known to us when he sent his report recommending that in view of the political misdeeds of the people not only should Government withhold relief but it should not permit any non-official organisation to conduct relief in the affected area. Could heartlessness go any further? The Governor himself after remaining silent for an amazingly long period called for the co-operation of all sections of the people for conducting relief operations. But there was repeated obstruction when we attempted to create an atmosphere in this district which would have placed all political controversies into the background and roused the people to a united sense of corporate activity in organising and distributing relief. Three of the Ministers including myself were in Midnapur about 12 days after the cyclone. The sufferings of the people that we witnessed were beyond description. Relief was then in a hopeless state of confusion and people were denied the barest facilities for movement and work. We discussed matters with leaders inside and outside the jail. I found that there was a genuine anxiety on the part of all to work together for alleviation of the great suffering that fell on the people of the district. What was wanted was a little bold imagination on the part of Government. After we returned to Calcutta, for two days we discussed the situation with the high command of the happy coterie at the Secretariat and I felt disgusted at the obstructive and unrealistic attitude of these so-called public servants. The Chief Minister agreed with the policy of help and sympathy that we recommended. But here again the Governor's interfering hands prevented us from doing what statesmanship and justice both demanded. Not only was the political situation not eased in spite of offer of co-operation of a large number of political prisoners and many people outside the jail but Government pursued the mad and sinister policy of relief by day, and raid and repression by night. A systematic burning and looting of houses of all conditions of people had gone on unbridled before the cyclone; even afterwards, I feel

ashamed to state, this was pursued in some parts of the district in spite of Government orders to the contrary. I have myself made enquiries and I have in my possession names of persons who were raided, robbed and humiliated before and after the cyclone. Copies of some of the lists I had personally handed over to high officials, but I have never been informed as regards the action taken against the offenders who masqueraded in the garb of upholders of law and order. Indeed allegations of oppression were made by people in our presence and in the presence of local officers but we were helpless to give them relief.... I shall end by saying that even about a month ago reports of raids on villages had reached us and they disclosed most lamentable incidents of rape and outrage of helpless women carried on systematically by the guardians of law and order themselves. I have with me the statement of the sufferers themselves and they constitute a disgrace on the Government of this country. The police would not record their statements and there is none to give them protection against the brutalities committed by the pillars of democracy and liberty. I wrote to the Chief Minister almost immediately after the occurrence and I am waiting from him to know what has been the fate of any enquiry that might have been made into the allegations. Yesterday it was the Moslem women of Eastern Bengal who were the victims. To-day it is the Hindu women of Midnapur who have shared the same fate. I have often wondered during the last few weeks what would have happened if even one single white woman had been the victim of the lust and cruelty of people supported by the Government of the day. The Press is gagged. Public opinion is muzzled. But this House is yet beyond the jurisdiction of the Defence of India Rules. We should unanimously demand an independent enquiry into all such incidents, ..

The picture of provincial autonomy that I have given is only illustrative and not exhaustive. The charges I have brought forward are of a severe character and I have done so with a full sense of responsibility....

## APPENDIX "C"

*Statement of Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq before the Bengal Legislative Assembly on the 5th of July, 1943.*

We meet to-day in this House under circumstances almost unique in the history of Provincial Autonomy in India. We last met on the 20th March, 1943, and our parting on that fateful morning took place under dramatic circumstances. During this interval of a week and three months, events have taken place which have shaken the constitution to its very foundations and exposed the mockery of Provincial Autonomy. ...I related on different occasions the circumstances under which I was made to sign a previously drafted and typed document, purporting to be my letter of resignation as Chief Minister.

I thought that these statements gave the public a fairly accurate idea of the manner in which my term of office as Chief Minister had been made dramatically to terminate, and I need make no further statements in this House. I have however been surprised to find that the Secretary of State for India has been making, or is being made to make, statements in Parliament regarding the circumstances relating to my resignation which contain incorrect versions of what had actually taken place and also insinuation which I cannot allow to pass unchallenged. In the course of his statements in Parliament, the Secretary of State for India has remarked that I had voluntarily resigned and that my resignation and subsequent events 'had occurred in the course of procedure under provincial representative institutions'. The language used by the Secretary of State was mysterious, if not meaningless. I sent a telegram to the Secretary of State definitely protesting against his incorrect version of events and requesting him to ascertain facts before he publicly committed himself to any account of what had taken place. I also sent a telegram to His Excellency the

Viceroy urging him to cable correct facts to the Secretary of State for India. To this I received a reply that the Governor had been in communication with the Secretary of State and with regard to variations between my version and that of the Governor, the Secretary of State felt satisfied that the version of the Governor was correct.

I confess I was not surprised at this reply to my protests. It was quite in keeping with 'the course of procedure under provincial representative institutions in India'. It is the policy of shutting both your eyes to what your official subordinates may be doing, known popularly as the policy of backing the man on the spot. It is the policy which encourages officials in India to do whatever they like, confident in the belief that whatever may be the measure of their guilt on any occasion, they will be supported all along the line by their official superiors. It is the policy which enabled Sir John Herbert, acting in 'the course of procedure under representative institutions', to refuse any enquiry into the shooting tragedies in the Dacca Central Jail and into the blood-curdling allegations against the officials in Midnapore. It is the policy which enables a Governor to ignore his Ministers and to commission a Secretary to send out chosen agents into the luckless Mofussil with plenty of unauthorised public money in their pockets to purchase, sell and hoard rice at their pleasure in order to be able to make fabulous profits while the children of the soil may be starving for want of food. It is the policy which enables a Governor to make appointments to high offices even in the Ministerial field of administration before, and not after, consultation with Ministers. It is the policy which enables favoured Ministers to order organised depredation into the hovels of the poor on the pretext of discovering hoarded foodstuffs, knowing full well that the countryside is already denuded of surplus rice. It is the policy which enables a reactionary Government to gag the Press and prevent publication of news and to stifle criticisms of their actions. It is the policy which secures immunity to Ministers when they defy public opinion and give monopolies in trade to associates political and otherwise, for the purpose of amassing

wealth beyond the dreams of avarice to be utilised for public and private purposes.

So far as I am concerned, my duty is therefore clear. I must tell the House the whole story in all its details so that future generations may know how India had been governed under the much vaunted system of Provincial Autonomy.... This duty becomes all the more imperative when I find that the Governor has been putting forward his own version of the events which I cannot accept as a correct statement of facts. On the other hand, I realise that I cannot make statements without criticism of the Governor's action which must in the nature of things be occasionally adverse, and some times even bitter and unpleasant. Not that Sir John Herbert or his fellow actors in the Constitutional Drama whose gruesome details I am going to unfold to-day, deserve any consideration at my hands. Had India been a free country and this Assembly a real Parliament with Sovereign Powers, Sir John Herbert would long ago have been recalled to milder climes, to spend his talents on less pretentious avocations than the Governorship of the Premier Province of India. It is hardly necessary to add that what I have to say about Sir John Herbert to-day refers only to his actions in his official capacity as the Executive Head of the Province and has no bearing whatever on any other aspect of his character or conduct.

I must tell the House that for some time after we began to work together, he was to me a considerate friend...Gradually, however, he began to exhibit a tendency to interfere in the details of the administration and to press his point of view with a tenacity which we felt was inconsistent with the free exercise by ministers of their own responsibilities. We however thought that these short-comings were temperamental and would disappear in course of time.

Towards the end of 1941, important political developments took place leading to the dissolution of the cabinet which had been functioning in Bengal since the beginning of Provincial

Autonomy....On the 1st of December, 1941, without any previous indication whatsoever, six of my colleagues tendered something like mass resignation. Two other resignations followed and I accepted the suggestion of the Governor to tender my resignation as well, in order to enable the Governor to constitute another Cabinet. My conspiring colleagues moved heaven and earth to get Hindu colleagues, but they utterly failed in their attempt. On the contrary, all the various groups in the House rallied round me, and no less than 173 M. L. A.'s sent on their own account a memorandum to the Governor declaring that they were willing to work the constitution under my leadership. About forty members, calling themselves the Muslim League Parliamentary Party in the Assembly, sullenly held aloof. I did my utmost to induce them to join me in forming an all-parties cabinet, but they stubbornly refused to do so.

One would have thought that the obvious course left for the Governor was to call me to form the cabinet. But he adopted a course which was at once unusual and unconstitutional. He waited long to see if Sir Nazimuddin could secure a majority and it was only when he finally despaired of having Sir Nazimuddin as Chief Minister, and perhaps because of pressure from other quarters that Sir John after 10 days' hesitation asked me on the 11th December, 1941, to form a cabinet. I shall not refer here to the manner in which my Party was crippled by the sudden arrest of Mr. Sarat Chandra Bose before I took oath of my office as Chief Minister. By the 12th December I was able to submit the names of 8 of my colleagues and I wanted time to submit some more names. The 9 ministers were sworn in on the 17th December and Sir Nazimuddin went into opposition on the pretence of upholding the interest of the Muslim League in Bengal.

It was for the first time that Moslems belonging to various points of view, Hindus belonging to the Congress and of other schools of thought, together with various small groups and Scheduled caste groups all combined to co-operate in the administration on purely national and patriotic lines. I



suspect that such a cabinet did not appeal to Sir John Herbert and he therefore hesitated to agree to the formation of such a cabinet and continued to evade its formation till at last he was compelled to give in.

Significant events soon showed that the cabinet we formed in December 1941, did not find favour with Sir John Herbert. Sometime in January 1942, I requested the Governor to let me have an expansion of the cabinet, particularly by the addition of 2 Ministers of the Scheduled castes. I also insisted on the appointment of Parliamentary Secretaries. The Governor told me plainly that no expansion of the cabinet would be made or Parliamentary Secretaries appointed till the Budget had been discussed and passed. The budget was passed in due course but he still refused to expand the cabinet. Each time that I wanted Sir John Herbert to take up the question, he put me off with some excuse or other, but showed himself extremely anxious to get Sir Nazimuddin and some of his colleagues into the Cabinet.

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I will now come back to the consideration of events after the formation of our cabinet of 1941. As I have said, Sir John Herbert was not only unsympathetic but in many cases positively obstructive. We felt his interference and obstruction in matters of day to day administration so very keenly that we apprehended that we were heading towards a crisis. I accordingly addressed a letter to the Governor on 2nd August, 1942, explaining to him that the situation was becoming critical and asking him to proceed on constitutional lines. I wrote :

“At a time when the implications of the Congress Resolution have filled all our hearts with the deepest anxiety for the future of India, I feel unfortunately compelled to write this letter to Your Excellency. I wish I could avoid this correspondence. You are the Governor of the Province and I am your Chief Minister and your principal adviser. Our mutual relations impose on both of us reciprocal duties and obligations

and I can never shirk the responsibility of intervening by means of friendly, but frank, advice whenever I find you are treading the wrong path. If I allow things to drift, I will be failing in my duty to you and to the people of this Province. I am convinced that the time has come when I must speak to you quite openly what I feel in order to avoid a constitutional crisis in Bengal. More than once have I sounded a note of caution and have told you that you have been following a policy which cannot but have the inevitable effect of practically suspending the constitution in Bengal, reducing it to a position similar to that of the Provinces governed under section 93 of the Government of India Act. I have tried to convince you that, by listening to the advice of a few officials, you are acting as if your Ministers did not exist and that you were free to deal direct with Secretaries and other permanent officials. As the head of the Cabinet I cannot possibly allow this attitude on your part to go unchallenged. The present letter is no more than another and the last attempt to put matters right, and I sincerely hope that this letter will have the desired effect. I am writing with the stern resolve to assert myself as the Chief Minister, and I can assure you that if it leads to a constitutional struggle between you as the Governor and me as the Chief Minister, I will not shirk from doing my duty regardless of consequences.

“Broadly speaking, there are two classes of cases wherein, I regret to have to say, you have failed to act as a constitutional Governor. In the first category I will put that class of cases wherein I have detected your personal interference in almost every matter of administrative detail, including even those where your interference is definitely excluded by the Government of India Act. A little reflection will convince you how unwelcome must be such an interference, and how bitterly Ministers must resent impediments in the way of the exercise of the very limited powers which they possess under the Act. As it is, the Act is bad enough and is no better than a clever subterfuge by which the permanent officials have got all the powers but no responsibility, whereas the Ministers have all

the responsibility and no powers. But the camouflage with which the Act abounds is so transparent that it is not difficult to detect that, beneath the pretentious device of ministers functioning in a system of Provincial Autonomy, the real power is still vested in the permanent officials; the Ministers have been given a mockery of authority, and the steel frame of the Imperial Services still remains intact, dominating the entire administration, and casting sombre shadows over the activities of Ministers. Any interference with even this limited power of Ministers is therefore the worst of its kind, and I regret that your record in this respect has in no way been a negligible one. In the second category I would put those classes of cases in which you have, directly or indirectly, encouraged sections of permanent officials to flout the authority of Ministers, leading them to ignore Ministers altogether, and to deal directly with you as if the Ministers did not exist. Arising out of all this, there is also one important factor, not directly connected with the cases I have mentioned above, but which has also contributed towards the creation of the situation which I sincerely deplore. I refer to your attitude in Cabinet meetings, where you monopolise all the discussions and practically force decisions on your Ministers, decisions which are in many cases the outcome of advice tendered to you by permanent officials belonging to Services whose traditions are fundamentally opposed to a genuine spirit of sympathy with the feelings and aspirations of the people.

"I know these are very harsh words to use to a Governor, but I want to be perfectly frank with you. I have decided to carry frankness to the extreme limit, because it is my earnest desire to render you the utmost possible help in the difficult days that lie ahead of us. Whether you will accept my advice or not, is a matter with which I have no concern. The choice must lie with you. It is a question of confidence and trust.

...Administrative measures must be suited to the genius and traditions of the people and not fashioned according to the whims and caprices of hardened bureaucrats to many of whom autocratic ideas are bound up with the very breath of their

lives. It is to your own Ministers and not to this class of officers that you should turn for advice if you desire to avoid pitfalls which have always been responsible for administrative disasters.

"Let me now come to facts. As regards your personal interference in total disregard of Ministerial responsibilities, I will briefly refer to only a few. There is first of all the case of your mandate to the Joint Secretary, Commerce and Labour Department, in April last in the matter of the rice removal policy. Here you acted as if the Government of India Act in Bengal had been suspended, and you were at the head of an administration under section 93 of the Act. In a matter of such vital importance, affecting the question of the food-stuffs of the people, you should have called an emergent meeting of the Cabinet and discussed with your Ministers the best means of carrying out the wishes of the military authorities and of the Central Government. But you did nothing of the kind. You did not even send for the Minister in charge of the Department, although he was readily available, but you sent for the Joint Secretary instead. You gave him orders to take up the work of removal at once, without caring to find out the exact position regarding the excess of rice and paddy in different areas and the best means of removal and the cheapest method of carrying out the scheme. The Joint Secretary says that when he was arranging to carry out your orders, you grew impatient and gave him definite directions to arrange for the removal of excess rice from 3 districts within 24 hours. Even then you did not consult your Ministers, because presumably you thought you could not trust them. The result has been a dismal failure so far as this particular policy is concerned. The Joint Secretary, in his haste and hurry to oblige you, advanced twenty lakhs of rupees to a nominee of a friend to begin the work, without any terms having been settled, or without any arrangements having been made for the safety of public money, solely for the purpose of showing that he had started carrying out your orders. When we came to know of all this at a late stage, we did what we could to retrieve the unfortunate position into which Govern-

ment had been placed, but even then we could not avert the disaster. At the present moment we are faced with a rice famine in Bengal mainly in consequence of an uncalled for interference on your part, and of hasty action on the part of the Joint Secretary. As regards the huge sums of money advanced indiscreetly under your orders by the Joint Secretary in the first instance, our legal advisers are extremely dubious if we can ever expect to recover the whole amount. The loss to Government is bound to be a considerable one, and the responsibility for this needless waste of public money must be shared by you and your Joint Secretary.

“Then I come to the boat removal policy. In this you have all along been acting under the advice and guidance of some permanent officials without taking your Ministers into confidence. You have even ignored one who happens to be not merely your Chief Minister but also the Minister in charge of the Home Department. You seem to have been consulting the Military authorities in secret and discussing plans with the permanent officials; and when everything is almost settled and matters have gone beyond control, you sometimes talk to us with a view to impart information as to what had been done or was being done. The most outstanding instance of blunder which has been committed by the permanent officials, apparently with your knowledge and concurrence, has been the case of the prevention of boats from going out into the Bay of Bengal for the purpose of cultivation of the lands in the various islands lying at the mouth of the Delta. Some tardy recognition of the urgency of the situation was made when a limited number of boats was allowed to go out into the Bay, but it was then too late to mend matters. I will not go into details, nor is it necessary to do so. It is enough for me to emphasize that the whole scheme was planned in consultation with the Military authorities and some permanent officials, without the knowledge not merely of the Cabinet but even of the Home Minister.

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“During the last few days I have discovered that orders have

been passed by Secretaries either on their own responsibility or with your approval, explicit or implicit, by totally ignoring the Ministers. For instance, orders have been passed that the Government of India should be requested to send back to Bengal all officers lent to India by the Bengal Government ; orders have been passed that the powers exercisable by the Provincial Government under section 76 (B) of the Defence of India Act and Rules be delegated to local officers. I was not consulted in these cases although they affect vital matters of policy. Every day some fact or other comes to light which reveals how orders had been passed in important matters without the cognisance of the Minister concerned. I strongly deprecate and resent this procedure. After all, I and my Cabinet are responsible for whatever action is taken by Government and announced in your name. It is wholly unconstitutional and even unfair to saddle us with responsibility for matters of which we have had no knowledge and with which we have had no concern.

“You should act as the constitutional Governor and not as the mouthpiece of permanent officials, or of any political party. In other words, you should allow Provincial Autonomy to function honestly rather than as a cloak for the exercise of autocratic powers as if the Province was being governed under section 93 of the Act.”

I received no reply to this letter of the 2nd August, 1942, and I was surprised that even in the course of private interviews, Sir John Herbert never referred to the matters I had discussed in the letter regarding my strong criticisms of his action. It is significant that he never attempted to reply to any of the very serious allegations I had made in the letter, although possibly he was all the time harbouring resentment. A few days later came the Bombay resolution of the All-India Congress Committee and the disturbances which broke out all over India on the 9th of August. It is painful to refer to the unfortunate happenings in India which followed the Congress resolu-

tion, and Bengal naturally had more than its share of the policy of repression which was carried on throughout India in the name of suppression of what was called the Congress rebellion in the country. The Defence of India Rules were freely used to arrest and imprison prominent leaders of the people and also to impose what was called collective fines in areas where the disturbances happened to be of an abnormal character. In the case of many of these arrests and orders of imprisonment, I differed from the police point of view and also from the Governor's point of view. In a very few cases, my recommendations for release were accepted, but I was over-ruled in every other case. In some cases, the evidence appeared to me to be so slender that I expressed my surprise that the police should be insisting on orders being passed on practically no evidence. A few of these arrested persons have been released within the last week and I wish the materials on which they had been originally arrested and the reasons for which my orders of release were over-ruled by the Governor, could be made public. Possibly, the Governor has agreed to the release of prominent politicals in order to cover the present Ministry with short-lived glory, but the public can easily see through the game. In many cases orders passed by me as long ago as August or September last have been allowed to remain unexecuted till some momentous considerations of State have induced the Governor to consent to their release at this moment just on the eve of the session of the Legislature.

In the case of collective fines, we had tremendous difficulties. In most of the cases the amounts imposed were hardly commensurate with the crimes that had been committed and in almost all of these cases the innocent suffered more than the guilty. As usual, my dissentient voice never prevailed and the police point of view and the recommendations of the permanent officials found favour with the Governor.

In spite of all my efforts to avert a crisis, time brought no change in attitude of the Governor. Our relations day by day

became strained, and matters came almost to a crisis during the August and September Session of the Assembly. The European Party had tabled a resolution supporting all the measures taken by the Government to suppress what was called the Congress rebellion, and the so-called Muslim League Party had tabled a resolution expressing the opinion that the measures taken had been inadequate. Both these resolutions were somewhat embarrassing to me because neither of them contained the whole truth. The Muslim League motion was meant as a vote of censure and the European Party resolution was meant to extract a statement from the Congress groups that the repressive measures taken had been justified. The Assembly, however, broke up under somewhat boisterous scenes of indiscipline manifested by a few members of the Muslim League, but as subsequent events went to show, the matter did not terminate there.

In the meantime, the situation in the province deteriorated and the disastrous consequences of the mistaken rice policy began to manifest themselves. There was shortage of rice even in the most fertile portions of Bengal and in spite of loud protests by the people, reckless speculation in rice by Government agents began to deprive the people in the rural areas of even their ordinary requirements of food.

I went to Delhi to attend a conference regarding the condition of rice and other foodstuffs and I got an assurance from the Government of India that all exports of rice from Bengal would be prohibited. Unfortunately, however, export was never stopped and authentic reports have disclosed the deplorable fact that even when there was a rice famine in Bengal, exports of rice continued to go on in large quantities. It was at this time that the Governor decided to appoint a rice controlling officer in place of Hon. Somerset Butler to control all sales and purchase of rice and selected Mr. McInnes for this purpose. I had represented to the Governor that an Indian with sufficient experience of business in rice should be appointed, but he was of a different opinion. I was surprised one day to hear that the selection had already been made and Mr. McInnes had been asked to join the post. I made no secret of the fact



that I did not approve either of the appointment of Mr. McInnes or the manner in which that appointment had been made. Matters were becoming unpleasant and Mr. Pinnell came to see me one day with the file relating to that appointment. After an elaborate discussion I thought that it would be useless to upset an appointment already made, and I therefore agreed to give Mr. McInnes a chance. I was, however, surprised to find subsequently some remarks made by the Governor in which the facts about the appointment of Mr. McInnes had been very much distorted and there was also a remark by the Governor that Mr. McInnes and Mr. Pinnell should be allowed to go on unchecked with their own policy, and any interference on the part of the Ministers with their work should be reported to the Governor. I took serious objection to these remarks and I felt compelled to write a frank letter to the Governor, explaining to him my point of view and telling him how bitterly I resented the whole affair. The following is a true copy of the letter.

88/2, Jhowtola Road,  
Calcutta,

*The 9th January, 1943.*

DEAR SIR JOHN,

I was surprised to receive from Mr. Pinnell a copy of certain notes purporting to embody the substance of our discussions during my interview with you on the 2nd January. I find on enquiry that my colleagues have also got extracts of the said note which attribute to me facts which I dispute. Out of sheer courtesy at least, my consent should have been taken before the document was circulated. I wonder if the document was drafted and circulated for the purpose of binding me down to decisions which I did not approve. What is most regrettable is that the document ends with a veiled threat. It raises a constitutional issue of vital importance which requires full clarification.

\* \* \*

Lastly, I record my disapproval of the whole policy you and some of your officers have been pursuing since April 1941,

regarding the matter of food-stuffs and supplies. I reserve to myself the right to make a public statement, if necessary, that actions had been taken in many cases without reference to me and in some cases even against my wishes.

Yours sincerely,  
(Sd.) A. K. FAZLUL HUQ.

Sir, one word more and I have finished. I have made certain definite allegations against His Excellency the Governor. I have charged him with partisanship and violation of his Instrument of Instructions. The charges are either true and correct, or false and incorrect. The public have a right to know whether His Excellency accepts my allegations as true and correct or otherwise. His Excellency is not without his remedy. Apart from issuing Government communiques or Press Notes, His Excellency the Governor has the right to address the House and let the Members know his version of the various incidents to which I have referred in my statement. The points raised are of the utmost constitutional importance and His Excellency would be extremely ill-advised if he allows the public to draw their own conclusions from his studied silence.<sup>1</sup>

1 Cawnpore, July 8.—*The Pioneer* observes the following editorially as regards Mr. Fazlul Huq's statement in the Bengal Assembly :

"Never since the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy in 1937 have such serious charges been levelled against the Governor of a Province as Mr. A. K. Fazlul Huq now makes against Sir John Herbert.... But what we feel, the public of the province and of India as a whole have a right to demand a reply from Sir John Herbert dealing adequately with the allegations made against him. Whatever medium His Excellency chooses for the purpose, whether an official 'communique' or an address to a joint session of the Bengal Legislature, he owes it to himself as much as to the general public and to the Governments of India and Great Britain, to clear himself of the charge so clearly set forth by his late Prime Minister of consistent unconstitutional behaviour." (*The Amrita Bazar Patrika*).

## APPENDIX "D"

*Speech of Mr. K. C. Neogy on the Food Situation delivered in the Central Assembly on November 15, 1943.*

The calamity which has befallen my unfortunate province at the present moment is in a sense unparalleled in the history of human civilisation. Starvation, death, pestilence, have been known to follow in the wake of victorious tyrants overrunning foreign territory. In the present instance, however, this gigantic tragedy is being enacted while a well established Government is functioning in the country. If we consider the acts of omission and commission of which Government have been guilty in their attempt to prevent the outbreak of this famine or to deal with it adequately, we cannot help thinking that this famine is primarily a State industry, and to my mind in certain of its aspects it bears the hall-mark of a genuine British manufacture.

I recall with disappointment and sorrow the debate that took place in this House three months ago when we had the Honourable Sir Azizul Huque as the Member in charge of this Department. I say I recall that debate with disappointment and sorrow because on that occasion we tried to rouse the Government to the necessity of taking prompt action for the prevention of a tragedy that was fast overtaking my province. I remember with disappointment and sorrow the attitude that was taken up by Sir Azizul Huque as the mouthpiece of an incompetent and callous Government in parrying all our suggestions and questions seeking information about the actual state of affairs in the country. At that moment in a mood of frustration Sir Azizul Huque sought solace in Tagore's poetry. Lord Linlithgow was busy packing his trunks. A friend of the bovine species, he perhaps would have been more interested had it been a case of cattle epidemic in Bengal. Or was it because a sense of constitutional chastity prevented him from visiting Bengal in those days ?

The plea has been raised that this famine has been aggra-

vated, or at least its treatment has been made difficult, because of the division of responsibility between the Central Government and the province. If it is a question of policy of repression, somebody has got to press the button at New Delhi and the whole country can be set ablaze; and the policy that is enforced throughout India, irrespective of the existence of a ministry or not in any province, is carried out faithfully in every detail throughout the length and breadth of the country. This Government has specialised in the enforcement of law and order of the Maxwellian variety. If, however, it is a question of preserving human life and providing food for the people, well, then comes the rub. Well, then let the Azizuls fight the Fazluls and the Srivastavas the Suhrawardies, so that our friends in England can establish beyond the shadow of a doubt the incapacity of all Indians for self-government.

Sir, the debates that took place recently in the Houses of Parliament have been a great eye opener to us. The official spokesman mentioned all the facts except the real ones, that could be held responsible for this unheard of famine. Mr. Leopold Amery threw up his hands in holy horror, while contemplating the increase in India's population during the last census. I have in front of me certain statistics which I have taken some pains to study and from which I find that whereas during the last three centuries and odd the British population has increased more than 8 times, the Indian population has not increased more than four times. Moreover, if we were to take, say, about a period of 50 years prior to the last census, the total increment in India is found to be about 30 per cent, whereas the increment in the United States of America for that half century stood at 186 per cent, in Japan 74 per cent, Great Britain 54 per cent, Italy 46·8 per cent, Switzerland 43·5 per cent, Germany 42·2 per cent, as against India's 39 per cent. If we regard for a moment the progress of population in Great Britain and Wales, and if particularly we examine that census decade 1871-1881, during which Leopold Amery was vouchsafed to an expectant world to fulfil his Heaven-appointed mission of presiding over the India Office in his dotage, we find

that the increase of population was 14·36 per cent in England and Wales. We are not aware that Mr. Amery protested against this phenomenon either before or after his birth. Nor are we aware that England and Wales was swept by a devastating famine as a consequence of this phenomenon. Sir, is it the case of the British Government that India is no longer in a position to maintain a larger population? If that be their case, let us examine it a little further. Two speakers in the Houses of Parliament pointed out the very low outturn per acre of food-grains in India. I am not going to trouble the House with the percentages. Taking rice, I find that in the case of the province of Bengal, in regard to which we have the benefit of an authoritative commission, the Land Revenue Commission of 1940, which was presided over by Sir Francis Floud, it has been recorded that the outturn of paddy per acre has not progressed since the days of Emperor Akbar. If anything, it has gone down. Now, Sir, the Commission compares the yield in respect of rice of the various rice producing countries and points out particularly with reference to Japan, that although in Japan where the same problems of over-population and uneconomic holdings exist, the yield is at least three times as much as that of Bengal and in China it is more than double. I wonder if the British Government wants to take that as a credit and as a proof of the success of their trusteeship of India. Admittedly a very large proportion of the Indian population has always been on the margin of starvation. Indeed it has been pointed out by many writers in the past that very many thousands and hundreds of thousands of the people really live in a state of semi-starvation even in normal times. When therefore India got embroiled in a total war, was it not expected of our trustees to take some care to ensure a sufficient supply of foodstuffs for India's population? Mr. Amery says that precautions were taken soon after the fall of Singapore. I think Singapore fell about the middle of February 1942. Burma soil had already been invaded on the 9th December, and what were the precautions taken? The only constructive programme to which the Government can point in this connection is the starting of the

'Grow More Food' campaign, which was inaugurated as "early" as the 7th April, 1942, Burma soil having been invaded on the 9th December, that is to say, about four months earlier. Moreover, what was the attitude of the Government of India in regard to the question of increasing the rice acreage in Bengal ? Just before Burma was invaded, the Government of Bengal was persuaded by the Government of India to insist upon an enlarged acreage under jute in view of problematic orders from America and other parts of the world. In spite of the opposition of the representatives of jute growers on a statutory body, the jute growers were compelled to undertake double the acreage of what they were prepared to agree to, and this insistence went on till the 24th March, when the Government of India permitted the Government of Bengal to order a reduction in view of the developments of the war. It had already become too late and there could be no remedy of the situation. The result was that the area under rice underwent a shrinkage. The area under rice in Bengal in the year 1942/43 was 7 lakhs of acres less than in the year 1941/42 ; and this decrease in the acreage has partly to be ascribed to this policy of the Central Government in encouraging a larger acreage under jute than the jute growers themselves wanted. Then, Sir, exports continued to the Mid-East and Africa ; and it cannot be said that so far as the export policy is concerned, the Provincial Government had any say. Indeed, it is on record that the Ministers protested on more than one occasion against the policy of export in which the Government had indulged, but to no effect. The Government of Bengal really meant Sir John Herbert in those days—and the Ministers kept on protesting, but to no effect. In the Gregory Committee report a fantastic assumption has been made that the high prices of foodgrains really encouraged the producers to gorge themselves with food. A more fantastic suggestion cannot be made, and its hollowness has been exposed in the note appended to that report by the present Minister of Agriculture for Bengal, where he points out that not more than 10 per cent of the agricultural population, perhaps he was speaking exclusively of Bengal, could be said to have anything like any surplus.

The rest either had to depend upon subsidiary occupations, because of the uneconomic sizes of their holdings, or they just barely maintained themselves with the produce of their fields. The Floud Commission also made a recommendation that a very large proportion of the cultivators really do not possess economic holdings. They pointed out that 29 per cent, of the total population of Bengal represented landless agricultural labour, and that of the rest barely one-fifth has just sufficient land for maintenance. Two-fifths are cultivators of extremely small holdings. While these factors have been conveniently ignored by the authorities in England in the course of the debate that took place in the House of Parliament, as also in this House by the Honourable Member in charge. An undue emphasis has been placed on hoarding. I entirely agree that hoarding has to a very large extent been responsible for the present famine, but hoarding on whose part? As pointed out by the Minister of Agriculture in Bengal, not more than 10 per cent of the agriculturists could possibly be suspected of hoarding anything like, say considerable amounts which could make any impression on the markets.

One of the factors which went to contribute towards this famine was referred to in the House of Lords by Lord Huntington when he said that grain bought for the army and army reserves must also be a contributory cause. This has not been referred to by any other speaker. Now, Sir, a good deal of discussion has taken place in the Gregory Committee as regards this point. We find a laboured apologia in the report to indicate that, after all, the army feeds the Indians who otherwise have to be fed by the country and, although the standard of consumption in the case of soldiers may be higher than the standard of consumption in their homes, the difference between the two standards cannot be very considerable; and although the army is expected to hold reserves, the reserves are not at the present moment held up to the mark. But, Sir, there is one point which has got to be remembered in this connection. Though quantities do matter, it is not so much the quantities, as the simultaneous withdrawal of foodstuffs from the market

by different competing parties, that matter. In the present instance, the Government of India is responsible for very large purchases made on behalf of the Army, as well as considerable purchases made for the benefit of the civilian Departments, of which the Railways perhaps take the lead. It is admitted that all the Departments of the Government of India, and all the Departments of the Government of Bengal, had to be supplied with rations at concession rates, though the details of this privilege vary from Department to Department. In some cases, the entire families of the employees are entitled to be supplied with rations at concession rates. In other cases, perhaps the individual employees alone are so entitled. But, then the fact remains that very large purchases had to be made by Government for the purpose of carrying out this obligation. That meant withdrawal of large quantities of grains from the market simultaneously with the purchases made on behalf of the Army. This fact is amply illustrated by a very recent publication on behalf of the Government of Bengal in which it is pointed out that from the 1st of March to 31st August 1943 the total quantity of food-grains received on Government account, including purchases by Government agents from outside Bengal and purchases on Government account within the province itself, amounted to 65.3 lakhs of maunds. Out of this, these different Departments which enjoyed certain priorities, the industrial concerns, the essential services and so on, took away 22 lakhs of maunds, that is to say, more than one-third of the total quantity that was available to the Government of Bengal. The despatches to the districts amounted to  $16\frac{1}{2}$  lakhs of maunds. That is to say, out of a total of 65 odd lakhs of maunds, the districts which represent 6 crores of population, got  $16\frac{1}{2}$  lakhs of maunds. Is it, then, any matter of wonder that the distress was so acute and so tragic in its effects in the interior of the province? I find that only five days ago, a Dooars planter, evidently an honest Briton, writing to *The Statesman* said the following :

What is wanted is the restarting of a free movement of rice and paddy to local bazaars throughout Bengal. This



will happen if large industrial concerns require again to lay in stocks to safeguard their labour and they will only be carrying on the vicious circle of the past year. This must not be allowed to continue.

Sir, we had another honest Briton in the Council of State, Mr. Parker, admitting that he had hoarded large stocks of food, though for the benefit of his employees. Hundreds of Parkers all over Bengal contributed to the misery of the population by resorting to this procedure for the purpose of safeguarding their own interests.

I expect Sir Henry Richardson to get up and explain the part that was taken by his friends in this particular matter. Nowhere else can such a thing be imagined. There was a mad rush for securing grains, and it is referred to in the Gregory Report as a scramble for supplies at ever-increasing prices which they say had diminished supplies procurable. Who was responsible for this scramble? Let Sir Henry Richardson answer. Between Government and the employees of labour, those who are understood to be engaged in essential industries (and the very touch of the white hand seems to endow any industry with the character of an essential industry), the scramble went on, and was to a very large extent responsible for the famine which we are discussing. What did the Central Government do? According to a statement made in this House, till 29th May 1943, there was no statutory authority given to the Provincial Governments to require employers of labour to submit returns of the stocks that they held for distribution to their employees, nor to take out a licence for the maintenance of such stocks. Am I very wrong when I say that the Central Government is itself responsible for encouraging employers of labour in this murderous enterprise of theirs? At no time in the history of India the cleavage between the Government and the people had been brought out so clearly. Here was the Government supported by the capitalists whose needs must be satisfied at all costs, if necessary, at the sacrifice of humble lives. Nobody was there to enquire as to what was happening to the people—six crores of people in the Province of Bengal.

This attitude was very forcibly expressed by a British executive officer in one of the Eastern Bengal districts when he pointed out that the life of a pack mule belonging to the military transport department was more valuable, and deserved to be preserved with greater care, than the life of people who were not helping in the war effort. That truly represented the attitude of a section of the permanent officials in this country, and that also led to the tragedy that we are witnessing today.

Sir, I have very little time at my disposal to deal with the other points that come to my mind. Sir, the cup of my humiliation is full to the brim. I have under the rules of procedure of this House to word my amendment as a recommendation to those very people who, I think, are responsible for the misfortunes of my countrymen. But, Sir, I feel that I am pleading at the bar of history—history that is not propaganda, history that is truthful, history that is fair and just to the weak and the oppressed, and I have no doubt about the verdict of that history.

## APPENDIX “E”

*Extracts from a statement of Mrs. Vijayluxmi Pandit on the conditions in the flood and famine affected area in the Midnapore District, dated October 26, 1943.*

“On returning to Bengal after a period of two weeks I find the situation badly deteriorated. Any statement about existing conditions involves a contradiction of everything which has been said by Mr. Amery regarding the Bengal food crisis during the past weeks.

Today the starvation continues, but added to it, and further complicating the situation, is the fact that disease is spreading all over the province. Malaria is taking its toll and having lost all powers of resistance, the poor people are dying in large numbers. Cholera and dysentery are on the increase—the

sanitation in towns and villages is neglected—medical aid hardly exists and even where emergency hospitals have been started their work is hampered through lack of medicines....

I saw three dead bodies and five skeletons between Kharagpur and Contai. One body had already been attacked and the contents of the stomach removed—a dog finishing the work begun by the vultures.

In another place an old man lay recently dead—the body hardly cold—his emaciated limbs and the look on his face was too horrible for description.

One dead woman clutched pathetically to a filthy rag and an earthenware pot—her sole belongings with which she seemed loath to part even on her journey to another world.

In several places bodies had been thrown into a wayside pool and the stench of decomposing flesh was foul.

Small cultivators and labourers had sold all they possessed and are migrating to the towns in search of food. Those who possessed a few household goods have parted with their possessions, either for a few pice or for a dole of grain. On market days one sees brass household utensils and women's silver ornaments for sale at the wayside shops.

But all this pales into insignificance in comparison with what is happening in the more remote villages. Many of these are very difficult of approach. Some of them have been entirely abandoned and the empty huts tell a pathetic tale. The canal by which one goes to these villages is filthy—dead bodies have been thrown in and are lying in some places in an advanced stage of decomposition....

Everywhere people are attacked with malaria and lie down with patient resignation to die, knowing that medical aid will not be available. The Government-subsidised kitchens are not only few in number but the dole given is so little that one begins to wonder why it is served at all. The gruel itself was in some district kitchens quite black.

\* \* \*

I might add there were no visible signs of any sanitary measures in the town and when I asked for information on this point, I was casually informed that it was very difficult to get sweepers.

Government have sent subsidised medical practitioners into some areas. These men are not supplied with quinine or any other medicine and are in some cases not even interested in the relief of human suffering. In one village I visited the people were all badly attacked with malaria and other diseases, but the doctor did not visit them in their huts—they were expected to go to him.

It is surprising to read from time to time in the papers that the situation is improving and that food and medical aid are being supplied in ever-increasing measure. The reverse is the truth and unless immediate steps are taken the province will be faced with another catastrophe in the form of an epidemic disease.

Hospitals are badly equipped and organised, and practically no arrangement is made for segregating cholera cases. *In some instances such cases are removed to the cremation ground before life is extinct and are simply thrown into the river or canal as soon as they are dead.*

Children when discharged from hospital are given over to any institution that is willing to take charge of them and in cases where no organisation comes forward they are simply put on the street, left to their fate. Women destitutes are in a worse plight than the men. *Cases have been brought to my knowledge of these poor creatures being raped at night while lying out on the roads. There also appear to be certain people at work who attempt to decoy women who are destitute and without protection.* No organised effort has so far been made to protect women. (Italics mine.)

Government must stop making false promises and give reasons which will convince the public that the agony through which the province is passing is unavoidable.

The half-hearted attempts of the Provincial Government to deal with the situation have made the public distrustful of all Government promises.

The talk one hears from officials about the easing of the situation is entirely misleading. The problem facing Bengal cannot be 'eased' unless most strenuous efforts are immediately made by the Provincial and Central Governments."

## APPENDIX "F"

*Extracts from the note of dissent to the Foodgrains Policy  
Committee Report by Mr. S. M. Hossain, the Hon'ble  
Minister for Agriculture, Bengal.*

The observation [in paras 8, 12 and 17 (ii)]<sup>1</sup> to the effect that "diminution in the marketable surplus through increased holding and increased consumption by the cultivators" occurred this year owing to cultivators getting good prices for their produce is entirely wrong. [In para 12 of Chapter II of the Report] it is stated, "It is a well known fact that the majority of the cultivators are subsistence farmers and in years they get good prices for their produce, as they are getting now, they would eat more than usual and the size (the margin) which contributes to the marketable surplus would be correspondingly reduced as by reason of prevailing high prices the cultivators have to part with less food-grains than before for paying their rents and meeting other liabilities. Prices being as high as they are the cultivators can afford to retain enough food-grains for themselves and their families even in a year of bad harvest." For examining the validity of this argument it is necessary to classify the Agriculturists. Agriculturists are of 3 broad classes:—(1) Agriculturists possessing more than sufficient lands, *i.e.* holding more than mere subsistence holdings, (2) Agriculturists with just enough lands for mere subsistence, and (3) Agriculturists holding insufficient lands which do not give them even their annual food. The first class of agriculturists always sell their surplus production after keeping enough for their full subsistence but their number is very limited, not perhaps more than 10 per cent. It is this class of agriculturists who get the advantage of high prices even in years of bad harvest, but they do not require to eat more in such years as they always get full meals and the question of eating more does not arise in their

case. They will however amass money in times of abnormal prices and spend it either in luxuries or invest it in purchasing lands of poorer agriculturists who have to sell lands in years of bad harvests. The second class of agriculturists who get produce just enough for annual food, are not benefited by the abnormal prices in years of bad harvest, as in such years they would not get even enough for whole year's food and will not be in a position to sell at all although perhaps they may have to sell a portion of the crops for payment of rent and meeting other urgent charges. The fact of their parting with less crops for payment of rent and other charges will be of little advantage to them, as it will be a set off against the short harvest they reap in a year of bad harvest, and the high prices they pay for other necessities of life as prices of all commodities sympathetically rise with the rise in the price of rice. Such agriculturists in a year of bad harvest have again to purchase crops for food at perhaps still higher rates towards the end of the year and so it is impossible for such people to eat more in a year of bad harvest. Then comes the third class—the holders of un-economic area—they are always in deficit in respect of their food and in years of bad harvest, they will be still worse off and so it will be absurd to think that they could eat more because of high prices. The theory that on account of high prices in a year of bad harvest the cultivators would eat more thus falls to the ground. Cultivators eat more in years of plenty only, even though the prices be low and it is only agriculturists of second and third class who eat more in such years and such more eating in years of plenty does not affect the food situation...the theory that the agriculturists would eat more in years of high prices than in years of depression is absolutely wrong....”

## APPENDIX "G"

*Extracts from the Report of the Anthropology Department of the Calcutta University on the deaths due to Famine in 1943, published on February 21, 1943.*

The Anthropology Department of the University of Calcutta has carried out a sample survey of ten of the famine affected districts of Bengal. The *statistics for eight districts* have so far been tabulated. They cover *eight hundred sixteen family units* with a total membership of *three thousand eight hundred and eighty*. The total deaths in these groups during June-July, 1943 to Nov.-Dec., 1943, has been *three hundred eighty-six or ten per cent, during six months* (i.e., 100 per thousand). The method of enquiry followed to ascertain the facts was the genealogical method, in which each family unit has its genealogy drawn up and details are noted on its basis. This method leads to collection of exact facts as contrasted to the usual official mode of just asking the village chowkidar or at best the President of the Union Board. This detail is noted as discrepancies are likely to be found between these statistics and official figures. It may be noted here that in a village in Nadia surveyed by Prof. K. P. Chattopadhyay, the *actual number of deaths* during the past year was found by him to be *thirty-two* whereas *the official report was of seven deaths only*. The wrong official figure was corrected after relief workers in touch with Prof. Chattopadhyay had pointed out the inaccuracy to the officials.

The death rate has been very different in the different areas. In the Kalna area in Burdwan it has been as low as fifty-five per thousand ; in the Madaripur area in Faridpur, about seventy per thousand ; in a group of villages in Contai (Midnapur) about eighty per thousand. In a group of village near Chaumohani (Noakhali) this was eighty-one per thousand. In a village in Dacca it exceeded one hundred and ten. In Nadia one village gave a sample with a death rate of ten per cent and another twenty-one per cent. A village in Howrah gave

the highest mortality rate of twenty-two per cent. As the death rate for Bengal does not exceed thirty per thousand per annum, *i.e.*, fifteen per thousand for six months, the excess mortality (100-15) of eighty-five per thousand, that is, eight and a half per cent has to be ascribed to famine and the pestilence that followed in its wake. As some of the areas in North Bengal were much less affected than Western or Central Bengal or the deficit areas of Eastern Bengal, some reduction has to be made to estimate the total mortality figures for Bengal. *It will probably be an under-estimate of the famine to say that two thirds of the total population were affected more or less by it. On this basis the probable total number of deaths above the normal comes to well over three and a half millions.* The estimate is subject to probable error inherent in all sample surveys. More exact estimates can be prepared only if officials work under guidance to collect data by scientific methods, covering a much larger number of family units and villages.

As may be expected, the figures for infant mortality have been extremely high. *The proportion of children below five years of age has varied from thirty per cent to fifty per cent of the total deaths.*

A very sinister and significant feature of the mortality figures is that *the death rate among adult men is much higher than among adult women.* In the less affected areas, nearly twice as many adult men have died as adult women. In the more affected areas, the proportion of men has been even higher. One consequence of this differential death rate is that a large number of families have been deprived of their earners, who are generally men. Unless a serious and planned attempt is made to set up this large population of women and children economically, and doles are granted pending such attempts, a high death rate may be expected to occur in this group during the current year (1944). Various social evils, such as prostitution, will also increase unless adequate steps are taken to make these families economically self-supporting. It may also be pointed out that communities which do not practise or encourage widow remarriage will show a greater decrease of popula-



tion ten years hence as the result of the present famine, than those communities which encourage such remarriage.

The survey reveals also that a very large proportion of small peasants have lost all their cultivable land. In the family units surveyed in the different districts, their proportion varies from twenty-five to thirty per cent. Another community which has lost its means of livelihood is that of fishermen. In some areas as in Dacca, many fishermen have sold their boats and nets during the period of food shortage. Elsewhere, as in Nadia, they have not been able to pay the fishery dues and have lost their fishing rights.

Mention should also be made of the high incidence of Malaria and other diseases disabling a large proportion of the surviving earners from doing any work. In some of the areas the proportion of such persons (disabled earners) was found to be as high as thirty per cent at a time. (*Italics mine.*)

## APPENDIX "H"

### FOOD AND SOCIETY

(*The Statesman, August 13, 1943*)

Under famine, social stability is not possible. Rome's imperial philosopher, writing in the midst of abundance, thought that castaways on a raft should gently and equally share their small store. But what if there is only a scrap, hardly enough for one? Will not infirm human nature make them fight for it? When destitution comes, as to many it has come in Bengal, the first thought is survival for self and children, and many, here as in other lands, will put children before self. Food must be found. Starving villagers, having an old belief that Calcutta is an eldorado, swarm into the city, to compete with the destitute there for the crumbs that fall from any able.

So every hour of the 24 may be seen in Calcutta, and other towns, men, women and children lying about the pavements,

the footpaths, under trees, lucky if they are sleeping through the hours of hunger, wet, weak and ill, almost hopeless. Those who carry away the dead found in the streets do noble work. But it may be that a large part of the gratitude felt towards them is for taking away sights that offend the eye or nose.

(For the rest of the article please see pp. 75-76).

## 1 PUBLIC OPINION

(*The Statesman*, August 16, 1943.)

The Gospel refers to those who ask for bread and are given a stone. In India the corresponding aphorism would say something about those who ask for bread and are given more than their fill of speeches. But even a speech of 7,000 words, which dimensions one attained in the Central Legislature, does not fill the hungry stomach.

One feature of these debates which now causes growing annoyance is the constant calling on public opinion to rally behind Governments in their attempts to deal with hoarders. Such appeals have been heard for months ; but of the attempts there is little evidence. Public opinion will not be slow if Governments show who is culpable. It has the spirit ; what it wants is the knowledge where to apply it. If Governments hit at hoarders and speculators they will not find opinion lagging. Opinion has long been ahead of Governments. We hear much threatening and assertion of what will be done one of these days. But the dearth and suffering are now and here and actual. Presumably these loud assertions about evildoers growing rich on the people's misery have foundation in knowledge. Then why is it that the outstanding consequence of knowledge is words, arguments, hazy threats ?

It is suggested that the Government of India must tread delicately, because there is the constitution to think of, and the

Provinces' or States' rights and susceptibilities. But if something effective were done to relieve the acute distress not one man in a thousand would trouble about constitutional propriety. If there are large-scale culprits whose greed makes present miseries, they should be ruthlessly jumped on without further delay, and there will be applause for the jumper.

## 2 REFLECTIONS ON DISASTER

(*The Statesman*, September 23, 1943.)

For several weeks, Bengal has been in famine's grip. All the standard clinical signs of this dread social malady of Asiatic lands have been evident : the pitiable wanderings of the emaciated poor in search of sustenance ; the disintegration of family life and attendant evils ; the mounting death-roll. Officially recorded weekly mortality from all causes in the Province's capital has now soared to over double the normal. In the week ending September 18 there were 1,319 deaths, as against an average of 596 during the corresponding weeks of the previous five years. Since August 16, 4,338 sufferers from starvation have been admitted to the city's hospitals, of whom 972 have died. Corpses of starved people removed from the streets and hospitals by the Police Corpse Disposal Squad and the two non-official agencies in the city since August 1 have been 2,527. Information from which to form any broad picture of conditions in the mofussil is scanty ; reliable statistics of mortality there are non-existent. But reports suggest that in many areas rural Bengal is even worse stricken than urban.

This sickening catastrophe is man-made. So far as we are aware, all of India's previous famines originated primarily from calamities of Nature. But this one is accounted for by no climatic failure ; rainfall has been generally plentiful. What the Province's state would now be had drought been added to

Governmental bungling is an appalling thought. Parts of the Bengal District of Midnapore were indeed devastated last year by cyclone ; during the wet season now ending areas in S.-W. Bengal have been much flooded, disordering the Province's communications. But those local misfortunes cannot account for a tithe of the present dreadful sufferings. Japan's conquest of Burma's rice exports, has been a big factor. So has the major strategic switch-over within India necessitated in 1941-42 by the sudden Japanese belligerence, which the Viceroy-Designate Lord Wavell last week vividly described in a London speech. This set up severe internal stresses. Continued rapid growth of population may also have bad influence.

But outstandingly the largest factor has been *shameful lack of foresight and planning-capacity by India's own civil Governments, Central and Provincial.* (Italics mine.) To the discerning, Japan's hostility was no surprise ; the surprise rather lay in it not happening sooner. Having privy knowledge of British military weakness in Malaya and Burma. Authority in New Delhi presumably must have envisaged loss to India of Burma's rice exports, and the consequent radical upset in the essential foodgrains trade throughout the Eastern Provinces. Yet nothing effective was done to ensure that the scores of millions of unmartial people being thrust by events into the war-zone should have adequate nourishment....

We say with deliberation that the present Bengal famine constitutes the worst and most reprehensible administrative breakdown in India since the political disorders of 1930-31. Government, despite its ramshackle structure, has since that date acquired impressive aptitude for handling political troubles ; this was shown in 1932-34 and again last year. But it has fallen down heavily over a primary economic obligation. The fundamental error was made of stumbling half-heartedly into a policy of controlling food and other commodities, while looking yearningly backward towards free trade, without establishing before-hand the executive machinery by which the controls could be enforced. A spate of paper orders poured from

Secretariats, signifying in practice little or nothing, and making Government's fair name a laughing-stock. For more than a year there has been not the least evidence of the authorities having any grip on the war-threatened Eastern Provinces' accelerating food-shortage and soaring prices. Each ugly step towards the actuality of famine has found them staggering along several moves in the rear.

To blame the bureaucracy alone would be injustice ; file-flattened, racially mixed, having little experience of trade, and with diminished belief in its own wisdom or future or even probity, it is the prisoner of its own accumulated defects, containing many fine men who still strive wholeheartedly amidst confusion for the peoples' good. In Indian life are elements at least as causative of disaster : the unbridled greed of mercantile classes, the mean hatreds among politicians, the widespread lack of civic sense among the ordinary populace. But India not yet being self-governing, disproportionately many of her people inevitably lack both the conferred actuality and the traditions of public service. Under the present system of government, responsibility for breakdown inescapably rests in the last resort upon Authority in Britain, and its immediate representatives here. Every British citizen is necessarily shamed and sullied when his Indian fellow-subjects die of starvation in Bengal.

It is nonsense however to suggest, as some do, that development of famine under an autonomous Provincial Ministry necessarily proves India's unfitness for self-rule. How far she is so fitted much perplexes us. Entirely new problems have been created by the war ; and many progressive-minded Britons were bitterly disillusioned by last year's political sabotage. But the lamentable second Fazl-ul-Huq Ministry of 1941-43 (from whose misdeeds so many of Bengal's ills spring) bears no relation to the present capable Punjab Government or the several talented Cabinets such as Mr. Rajagopalachari's or Mr. Kher's set up by the Congress Party in 1937-39. Nor has unqualified autocracy in India always proved efficient. Sir Cecil Beadon's Administration in 1866, when confronted with symptoms of

food-shortage in Bihar and Orissa, assumed (the resemblance is remarkable) that there was no genuine dearth, "large stores being in the hands of dealers...who are keeping back stocks out of greed." A devastating famine ensued, estimated to have eliminated about a quarter of the population. Like those of 1942-43, the 1866 Authorities failed to recognize advancing calamity and were outstripped by it.

Very different was the handling of another famine which Bengal remembers, that of 1873-74. Then, though twenty million people were affected, Government at every stage stood vigorously ahead of events. The Famine Commissioners later reported that :

There was absolutely no mortality from starvation ; at the outside not more than 22 deaths could be said to have even been accelerated by hunger.

A report in the columns of our ancestor "The Friend of India" about a single presumed death from starvation in May 1874 caused elaborate Governmental investigation and noting. During the 1873-74 famine, high personages took direct and visible interest in relief-measures. A further stimulus to efficiency, missing until a few days ago, apparently because wartime-censorship has blocked it, was the warm-hearted vigilance of British public opinion. Sir Richard Temple, the then Lt.-Governor of Bengal, recorded in his "Men and Events of My Times" :

The Indian correspondents of the London newspapers, especially *The Times*, sent vivid word-pictures of the coming calamity and set forth many considerations, the most of which was that the English Sovereign and nation should hold the Government of India answerable for averting, to the utmost of its power, the consequences of the drought. This view was developed by the leading organs of opinion in England itself, and so far as the authorities in India could judge, English opinion was becoming strongly excited.... Thus the minds of all were subjected to a severe strain and the officers of Government began to feel that they would be impeached if any failure were to occur, or if life should be lost through any shortcomings of theirs.

A major disaster was eventually averted....

The Famine of 1874 was over : the deaths from starvation were so few compared to the many millions concerned, that practically there had been no loss of life. The health of the people had been sustained, agriculture was unimpaired, the resources of the country remained uninjured, even the resources were nearly all realized. But there had been a large expenditure which however had been exactly foreseen, and to which the Government had made up its mind beforehand.

The contrast with contemporary affairs is pointed. It appears the more so because the Government of India's administration reports during the 15 years after the last Great War suggested that modern improvements had virtually eliminated risk of large-scale famine from India. There would be no basis however for contending that warnings during the last year or so have been absent. Many could be quoted ; we give but two. On January 23 *The Times* published a letter beginning

The Government of India is embarking on a policy which will produce a famine, and cost many thousands of lives ;

and opening its next paragraph with

In my considerable experience I know of no death from starvation in British territory.

That a man now outside the Indian administrative machine and in another country could then write thus, illuminates vividly the extent to which affairs have gone wrong. We ourselves, in an editorial dated November 21, 1942, criticized as dangerously belated the proposed establishment of a Food Department at the Centre, in terms which now wear a sadly prophetic look. This is how our article of 10 months ago ended ; its generalization remains true, and can bear repetition :

At least a year's dangerous leeway has to be made up. We incline to the opinion that, should widespread administrative breakdown befall India during the difficult years ahead, which is readily imaginable, there is greater likelihood of its originating from economic than from political distresses—despite the proportionately much weightier attention which the latter receive.

## 3 SEEN FROM A DISTANCE

(*The Statesman*, October 14, 1943)

Mr. Amery's speeches would be more acceptable in this country were they less habitually smug. His Parliamentary utterance last Tuesday (12-10-43) on what he euphemistically called the Indian food "situation" seems, from the long cabled text, intended to suggest to the British public that, so far as the Government of India and the India Office were concerned, all that could have been done was. The speech contained no direct admission of grave misjudgment on the higher authorities' part or even of error. Previous official assertions in London and New Delhi that there existed virtually no food problem in India were overlooked. Nasty words such as famine, starvation, corpse or cholera were carefully avoided. The Central Government's unexplained and amazing omission to establish a Food Department for a full year after Japan's declaration of war gained no mention.

Delighted reassurance at the prospect of quick remedy from London for present ills was thus not a description applicable to Calcutta citizens' feelings on reading the Secretary of State's announcement. By bad luck it coincided with official disclosure locally that the city's weekly death-roll from all causes had mounted by another 475 during the last fortnight and now stands at the shocking total of 1,967, which is nearly four times the average for the corresponding weeks of the previous five years. Mr. Amery's speech moreover contained one particularly unfortunate remark, irritating to tempers already under some stress. "It is largely due", he said, "to its (the Central Government's) exertions that what might have been a situation of widespread serious distress has been confined to Bengal, Cochin, Travancore and parts of the Deccan". As an example of the politician's art of smoothly evasive meiosis this takes memorably high place. Bengal alone contains a population larger than Britain's, and the provincial Food Minister but two days previously had described her as gripped by unprecedented



famine. Yet the distant Mr. Amery can imply that her distress does not by itself justify such adjectives as serious or widespread. Thoughtful observers on the spot will, we think, have found themselves sadly out of tune, both factually and emotionally, with the entirety of his speech of Tuesday except on one point—his criticism of the previous Bengal Ministry's mistakes. Here too his aptitude for understatement was manifest.

#### 4 THE DEATH-ROLL

(*The Statesman*, October 16, 1943)

The Secretary of State for India seems to be a strangely misinformed man. Unless the cables are unfair to him, he told Parliament on Thursday that he understood that the weekly death-roll (presumably from starvation) in Bengal including Calcutta was about 1,000, but that it "might be higher". All the publicly available data indicate that it is very much higher; and his great office ought to afford him ample means for discovery. The continuous appearance of effort on the part of persons somewhere within India's Governmental machine, perhaps out here, perhaps in Whitehall, to play down, suppress, distort, or muffle the truth about Bengal is dragging the fair name of the British Raj needlessly low. It contrasts most remarkably with the attitude taken during the famines near the end of the last century. Then, in the heyday of British imperial responsibility, though modern facilities for organization were lacking, no effort was spared to probe and proclaim the truth about any maladministration, so that it might be promptly dealt with and the blot on the honour of the Indian Empire removed.

The Government of Bengal's officially released daily statistics for deaths in hospitals in Calcutta alone during the first 12 days of October among so-called "sick destitutes" (the recently invented Governmental euphemism for starvation sufferers) give a total of 918. That works out to an average of 535 weekly for this one big city, whose total mortality from all causes during

the week ending October 9 was 1,967, which is nearly four times the quinquennial average. (That figure of four times affords ground for wider reflection). The September total for deaths among sick destitutes in the city was 1,334, making a weekly average of 312. These September and October starvation figures (which it will be noted show a grim progressive rise) are generally supposed to be incomplete, and are known to be so for September, owing to the two days' Governmental blackout then of news. In any case they take no account of persons dying from starvation in the streets.

Official figures of starvation-mortality for the Province of Bengal as a whole are unavailable to the public. There has been sustained outcry for them, or even for some up-to-date provincial vital statistics irrespective of starvation-mortality. The leader of the European Group in the Bengal Assembly on September 27 pleaded for information in vain. After arduous journalistic endeavour we incline to the belief that such statistics do not exist. But if Calcutta's population is taken at 3,000,000 (perhaps an over-estimate), and Bengal's at 60,000,000, then on the basis of 535 starvation deaths weekly for October in the Provincial capital there should now be 10,710 deaths weekly in the whole Province...

That is over nine times, and the previous more reliable figure nearly eleven times above the figure offered in writing last Thursday to Parliament and the British public (of whose profound anxiety about Bengal there is now welcome evidence) by the Secretary of State for India with all the authority and prestige of his high office. Many will think the wide disparity shocking. So far as conditions in the mofussil can be ascertained we believe them to be in some areas worse than in Calcutta; this if so, would in part offset the fact of Calcutta's population being abnormally swollen by refugees. There is thus this ugly possibility; adept at under-statement, Mr. Amery admitted that Bengal's weekly death-roll from starvation "might be higher" than his 1,000; the very imperfect official statistics available suggest that it might also be higher than our 9,000 or 11,000, which figures have those official statistics as their shaky basis.

# APPENDIX "I"

## 1 BENGAL—A DEFICIT PROVINCE

Total Population—61,456,000 (1941)

<i>Persons above 15 years of age :</i>		
59.2% of total		36,989,000
<i>Subtract</i>		
Widows <sup>1</sup> (above 15 years of age)		
taking one rice-meal a day :		
8.3% of total	5,187,000	
= 1 2 of adult		2,598,500
Persons taking rice-meals once a		
day : 6 % of total	3,750,000	
= 1 2 of adult		1,875,000
		<hr/> 4,473,500
Total adults requiring two full rice-meals a day		32,515,500
<i>Add</i>		
<i>Between 0-5 years of age :</i>		
15.5 % of total	9,717,000	
= 1 4 of adult		2,429,250
<i>Between 5-15 years of age :</i>		
25.2 % of total	15,750,000	
= 3/4 of adult		11,812,500
		<hr/> 14,241,750
Total population reduced to 'adults'		
requiring two full rice-meals a day		46,757,250
say		46,800,000
(at 5.5 mds. per annum		- 257,000,000 mds.
		= 9,370,000 tons
<i>Further add</i>		
Export <sup>2</sup> (tons)	100,000	
Seeds „	376,000	
		<hr/> 476,000 tons
Grand Total		9,846,000 tons
Available Supply (average)		8,500,000 tons

## 2

According to Government estimates average per capita per annum consumption of rice in Bengal is 344 lbs. For 61,450,000 persons, Bengal requires 21,484,864,000 lbs. or 9,590,000 tons for consumption.

1 There are widows who take two *rice*-meals a day ; but their number is more than set off by persons who are prevented from taking rice-meals due to illness.

2 Stopped for the present.

## Yield of Rice in Bengal, 1933-34 to 1943-44

Year	Tons	Year	Tons
1933-34	8,680,000	1938-39	7,567,000
1934-35	8,273,000	1939-40	8,471,000
1935-36	7,208,000	1940-41	6,043,000
1936-37	9,805,000	1941-42	9,821,000
1937-38	9,034,000	1942-43	6,916,000
1943-44		11,333,800	

## Comparative prices of Articles of Daily Use in 1939 (pre-war) and Apr.-Nov., 1943 (during the Famine) in Bengal.

	1939			1943*		
	Between			Between		
	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.
Rice (ordinary) p. md.	3	12	0	and 4	4	0
Flour "	7	0	0	7	8	0
Sugar "	7	0	0	7	12	0
Dal—						
Masur "	6	0	0	6	4	0
Mung "	7	4	0	7	8	0
Chola "	4	8	0	5	0	0
Arahar "	5	0	0	6	0	0
Oil—						
Kerosene tin	4	8	0	5	6	0
Cocoanut p. seer	0	5	0	0	6	6
Mustard "	0	7	6	0	8	6
Milk "	0	3	6	0	4	0
Fish (average) "	0	6	0	0	10	0
Eggs p. doz.	0	7	0	0	8	0
Vegetable—						
Brinjal p. seer	0	1	6	0		
Cabbage each	0	2	6	0		
Cauliflower "	0	2	0	0	4	0
Potatoes p. seer	0	2	0	0		
Jhinga "	0	1	0	0	1	6
Salt "	0	1	0	0	2	0
Coke (soft) p. md.	0	7	6	0	8	6
Matches p. doz.	0	2	6	0	4	0
Soap (washing) piece	0	1	6	0	2	0
Spices—						
Betelnut p. seer	0	6	0	0	7	0
Cloth per pair	1	10	0	1	12	0
Medicines average	0	12	0	1	0	0
Sugar of milk per lb.	1	0	0	1	4	0
Educational requisites						
Paper p. quire	0	2	0	0	2	6
Pencil each	0	0	6	0	1	6
Slate "	0	3	0	0	4	0
Slate pencil p. doz.	0	1	6	0	2	0
Nibs "	0	2	0	0	3	0
Ink p. bottle	0	6	0	0	8	0
Building Materials increase	...			... 400% to 600%		
Cutlery (domestic purposes) and Agricultural Implements	...			300% to 400%		

\* Most of the articles were not available at any price from time to time. Degree of adulteration enhanced the value of goods by another 50% or more.

# APPENDIX "J"

1

The following table gives an indication of what the Bengal Government have done for cyclone relief (1942-43) and famine relief (1943-44) :—

1.	On gratuitous relief amount spent over	Rs.	4,10,00,000
2.	On test relief amount spent	„ „	1,42,00,000
3.	For medical relief, water supply and other matters amount spent	„ „	1,00,00,000
4.	On loans granted amount spent	„ „	3,60,00,000
5.	Number of free kitchens run or helped over		6,600
6.	Maximum number of persons fed daily at free kitchens	„	2,539,000
7.	Total number of meals given from free kitchens	„	1,10,000,000
8.	Meals sold from cheap canteens	„	8,000,000
9.	Total number of people given daily doles in cash and grains	„	40,000,000

## *Articles distributed :*

10.	Foodgrains	over (mds.)	1,500,000
11.	Clothes	about (pcs.)	1,400,000
12.	Blankets and chadars	„	600,000
13.	Children's garments	over (pcs.)	100,000
14.	Milk powder, etc.	over (lbs.)	200,000
15.	Daily unit rations sold at cheap rates over		1,60,000,000
16.	Loss sustained by Government in above operations (items 10-15 above)	about Rs.	4,00,00,000

Number of Work and Poor Houses (based on information received upto 15-4-1944) 333

Number of Orphanages (do) 86

As regards combating disease, the following preventive public health measures were adopted by the Government :—

Preventive staff	4,500
Cholera inoculations per week	7,60,000
Vaccinations per week	9,50,000
Vaccine lymph distributed from 1-12-43 to 25-3-44	61,20,131 grains
Vaccination and inoculations given from 1-11-43 to 1-4-44	11,139,706 and 6,908,662 respectively

As regards medical relief, 520 hospitals have been started throughout the Province of which 42 are 100 bedded, 82 are 50 bedded and 396 are 20 bedded.

Some of the "measures" adopted by the Government of India to combat food-shortage in the country :—

**Price Control Conferences :**

*First* : October 18 and 19, 1939. *Second* : January 24 and 25, 1940. *Third* : October 16 and 17, 1941. *Fourth* : February 6 and 7, 1942. *Fifth* : April 7 and 8, 1942. *Sixth* : September 7, 1942.

The first Conference on Food, 'The Food ( Production) Conference' was held on April 6, 1942.

The Central Government Food Department was created in December, 1942.

The Central Government Food Advisory Council was constituted in June 1942.

Food Conference (held under the auspices of the above 'Council') :—

First : August 1942

Third : July 1943

Second : December 1942

Fourth : October 1943

The Central and the Provincial Governments issued a 'bewildering multitude' of Orders, Ordinances, Press Notes, etc., etc., which need no enumeration for the simple reason that they do not deserve any. These orders, etc. helped to make the Government's failure in tackling the Famine more glaring before the public.

The following list will help in forming an idea about the big staff and the expenses incurred on the Central Food Department.

Number of posts created since 1st March 1943 by different salary grades :—

**MAIN SECRETARIAT**

<i>Gazetted :</i>			p.m.
Rationing Officer	one	Rs.	2,500
Under Secretary	"	"	760
			+ 300 sp. pay
Superintendent	"	"	600-40-800
<i>Non-gazetted :</i>			
Assistants	ten	"	200-15-500
Clerks etc.	...	"	600

**DIRECTORATE GENERAL, FOOD**

*Gazetted :*

Dy. Director General (Grains)	one	Rs.	2,750
Asst. Director General (Purchase)	"	"	2,130

Director of Grains	one	Rs. 2,000
Asst. Director of Grains	"	" 600
Asst. Director of Grains	"	" 550
Dy. Asst. Director of Purchase	"	" 350-25-400
Dy. Asst. Director of Purchase	two	" 550
Industrial Planning Officers	"	" 300
Asst. Industrial Planning Officers	eight	" 175-300
Veterinary Officers	thirty	" 175-300

*Non-gazetted :*

Total number	sixty-four	" 300-2,250
Servants	forty-eight	" 960

as) advertised and proposed

to be advertised on March I, 1943 :—

*Gazetted :*

			p.m.
Dy. Regional Food Commissioner	one	Rs.	1,000-1,500
Asst. Regional Food Commissioner	"	"	600- 800
Area Inspectors of Food	seven	"	1,000-1,500
Resident Inspectors	fifty	"	350- 800
Hygiene Officers	seven	"	350- 800

*Non-gazetted :*

Total number	fifty-six	11,100
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## REGIONAL FOOD COMMISSIONERS

*Gazetted :*

p.m.

Reg. Food Commissioner, Eastern Region, Calcutta	one	Rs.	4,000
Reg. Food Commissioner, Punjab	"	"	2,750
Reg. Food Commissioner, Bombay	"	"	2,650
Reg. Food Commissioner, U. P.	"	"	2,650
Reg. Food Commissioner, Rajputana	"	"	2,500
Reg. Food Commissioner, Madras	"	"	1,900
	+sp. pay		400

Dy. Reg. Food Commissioner, Eastern Region	one	"	1,000
Dy. Reg. Food Commissioner, Punjab	"	"	1,000
Asst. Dy. Reg. Food Commissioner, Calcutta	"	"	600
Group Liaison Officer, Punjab	"	"	1,000

*Non-gazetted :*

Total Number	fifty-three	" 6,000
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There are officers of the Provincial Governments, too many to mention, and the Civil Supplies Department is responsible for the primary duty of feeding the people and keeping them alive.

## APPENDIX “K”<sup>1</sup>

### FAMINES IN INDIA

Bengal has been taken out of the list for obvious reasons. Territorial division with regard to the occurrence of famine as adopted by the Strachey Commission has not been disturbed. Spellings of the names of places found in the official documents have been retained.

### FAMINES IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY

1729-33—Severe scarcity began in 1729 and culminated in 1773.

1781-82—Famine due to war with Hyder Ali.

1790-92—Famine raged from November, 1790 to December, 1792 affecting Ganjam, Vizagapatam and Masulipatam.

1799-00—Severe scarcity in Dindigul.

1805-07—Famine in Nellore, North Arcot, Chingleput and also in Cuddapah, Karnul, Bellary, South Arcot, Tanjore and Trichinopoly.

1811, 1812 and 1814—Severe scarcities specially in Canara and Madura.

1823—Famine in Bellary, Cuddapah, Karnul, Vizagapatam, Guntur, Nellore, North Arcot, Madras and Salem.

1832-34—Guntur Famine.

1854—Famine ‘confined almost entirely to the Bellary District’.

1866-67—The worst affected tracts were Ganjam, Bellary, North and South Arcot, Salem, Madura, Malabar, Madras Town and Tanjore.

1876-78—Out of twenty-one districts in the Presidency, seven, viz., Bellary, Karnul, Nellore, Cuddapah, Chingleput, Salem and Coimbatore suffered from a really severe famine for an extended time. Other tracts affected were Madura and Tinnevely.

1884—Severe scarcity in Madura, Coimbatore and Cuddapah.

1889—Ganjam Famine. Lord Connemara wrote in June, 1899 : “a large amount of distress amounting to starvation, existed, and that the most urgent orders and the most prompt action were required if many lives were not to be lost by the most lingering and dreadful of deaths.”

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1 Based on the several Reports of the Famine Commissions.



- 1890-92—**Madras Famine.** Severe agricultural distress prevailed for over two years throughout the Madras Presidency. In the first six months of 1891 in the five districts of Cuddapah, Nellore, Chingleput, North Arcot and Coimbatore special relief operations were found necessary.
- 1896-97—Karnul, Cuddapah, Bellary, Chingleput, and Ganjam and Vizagapatam were the districts very badly affected.

#### FAMINES IN THE BOMBAY PRESIDENCY

- 1396—**Durga Devi Famine** said to have lasted for twelve years and extended over the whole of Southern India south of the Nerbudda which districts were entirely depopulated.
- 1460—Famine of Damaji Pant.
- 1520—Severe Famine (due to military disturbances in the Deccan).
- 1577—Famine (remembered only in Kutch).
- 1629-30—The most severe famine ever known before and it raged throughout the Deccan.
- 1650—Famine confined to Ahmedabad.
- 1659-60—A great scarcity raged throughout India (during the reign of Alamgir).
- 1585—A severe drought caused the Famine.
- 1718—Famine in Ahmedabad and Surat.
- 1747—Very severe famine in Cutch, Ahmedabad, Rewa Kanta, Surat, Aurangabad.
- 1757, 1766, 1774, 1782—‘Four minor famines or seasons of severe scarcity reported to have occurred in Cutch’.
- 1791-92—“According to the traditions and recollections of it which still existed in the minds of the people in 1867, it was the severest famine ever known, and it extended in greater or less degree to the whole of the Bombay Presidency except Sind and to Marwar. It is remembered in the South Mahratta country, as well as in the adjoining parts as the ‘Dagi Bara’, or ‘skull famine’, from the vast number of the skulls of those who had perished from famine.”
- 1802-03—“Very widely extended famine.” Its intensity was most felt in Khandesh, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Kaladgi and Dharwar; in the southern part of Hyderabad. It pressed severely on Belgaum, Satara, Poona, Surat and Kutch.

1812-13—"The famine was severely felt in Kutch and Katia-war, especially in the western parts, and in Marwar; and it extended to Ahmedabad, Kaira and Baroda."

1824-25—"In these years considerable and widespread scarcity extended over nearly the whole Presidency, but nowhere amounted to famine."

1833, 1838-39—Scarcity.

1845-46—Very severe scarcity in Khandesh and scarcity in other parts also.

1868-69—There was extreme local distress in Ahmedabad and Kaira, and a widespread but not acute scarcity and dearness of food in other parts also.

1876-77—Very severely affected areas were Khandesh, Nasik, Ahmednagar, Poona, Sholapur, Satara, Kaladgi, Belgaum and Dharwar.

The affected States were : Sangli, Kohlapur, Akalkote, Jath, the South Mahratta States (seven in number).

1891-97—Distress in Bombay, Deccan and the parts affected comprised the whole of Bijapur district, the Athni, Gokak and Parasgad talukas of the Belgaum district, and the Gadag, Ron and Navalgund talukas of the Dharwar district.

1896-97—The whole of Bijapur, Sholapur, Ahmednagar, Satara and Nasik and parts of Poona, Khandesh, Belgaum and Dharwar necessitated relief operations. The worst affected area was Bijapur.

1899-1900—The districts of Panch Mahals, Ahmedabad, Kaira, Broach and Surat (in Gujrat), Khandesh, Nasik, Poona, Ahmednagar and Thana (of the Central Division), Satara, Sholapur, Belgaum and Bijapur (of the Southern Division) and desert districts of Thar and Parkar were very badly affected.

## FAMINES IN UPPER INDIA

"Regarding the early famines that desolated Upper India very little information can be gathered from the slight and casual mention of them contained in history. The following facts are briefly abstracted from Mr. Girdlestone's report."

1345—This famine seems to have had more connection with the disturbed state of the country under Mahomed Togh-lak than with drought. It is described as having been very dreadful in its severity, especially round Delhi."

1471—"A year of notable famine."

- 1631—"This is said to have extended over all India."
- 1661—"The scene of the famine lay about Delhi, and the upper half of the Doab."
- 1739—"The invasion of Nadir Shah brought famine to Delhi and its environs."
- 1783—"It embraced the whole country from the eastern edge of the Benares Province to the Sutlej, and included Oudh and most of the Central India States."
- 1803-08—It was severely felt throughout Rohilkhand and the Lower Doab, from Farukhabad to Allahabad.
- 1812-13—Famine in Rajputana. The districts of the N.-W. Provinces bordering on Rajputana also suffered from this famine.
- 1819—Scarcity in Cawnpore, Allahabad, Kalpi and Banda.
- 1825—Scarcity in "all the districts west of Cawnpore."
- 1833-34—Famine in Rajputana, especially in Mewar and Sirohi, in Kotah, Bondi, Marwar and Bikanir.  
In Bundelkhand and Hamirpur, in Ajmer and Hissar.
- 1837-38—Known as "the most grievous famine experienced in Upper India since the commencement of the British Rule". The "central region of extremest severity" was between Agra and Cawnpore, and extended to all the surrounding parts of the N.-W. Provinces and the Native States to the south of Agra." The darkest tract comprised Muttra, Agra, Farukhabad, Mainpuri, Etawah, Etah, Cawnpore, Banda and Hamirpur.
- 1860-61—The area consisted of the upper part of the North-West Provinces and the adjoining districts of the Punjab lying between the Sutlej and the Jumna, and its blackest portion was the tract along both banks of the Jumna between Delhi and Agra. It was divided into three parts: the eastern tract contained the three districts of Rohilkhand, Bijnor, Budaun and Moradabad; the central tract consisted of the Doab districts as far down as the borders of Faruckabad and Etawah, which lay outside of it, and including only two parganas of Mainpuri; in the western tract which lay across the Jumna, the northern part of Delhi, Panipat, Thanessar, Umballa, were but slightly affected but the southern part of Delhi, Gurgaon, Muttra and one pargana of Agra were visited by very severe famine.
- 1866—The great Orissa Famine. Parts very severely affected were Puri, Cuttack and Balasore. "Eventually the tide of famine raged so high all over Orissa that local inequalities may almost be lost sight of in one-spreading sea of calamity".

1867—"There were great distress, severe scarcity, and in some parts the undoubted pressure of famine." The tracts that suffered most were the northern portions (adjoining the Nepal Terai) of Champaran, Tirhut and Bhagalpur.

1868-69—"No tract in Rajputana escaped its (drought's) influence, and the states of Marwar, Bikanir and the districts of Ajmir and Mhairwara, felt it with frightful severity."

North-West Provinces : "This province felt only the fringe of the calamity...The part which suffered most was the trans-Jumna tract, which includes a portion of Muttra, Agra, and Allahabad, the whole of Banda, Hamirpur, Jalaun, Jhansi and Lalitpur. In the two latter districts the famine was severe."

Punjab : "The worst part was the Hissar Division (containing the Hissar, Rohtak and Sirsa Districts) and the Karnal District.

Central Provinces : The part most severely affected was the northern part of the Saugor, Damoh and Jubbulpore Districts...In parts of Bhandara, Balaghat, Raipur and Bilaspur, there were very severe distress, almost amounting to famine."

1873-74—North-Western Provinces : There were two separate distressed areas, first the Sub-Himalayan tract in the east of the province comprising the northern portion of the Districts of Gorakhpur and Basti...The second tract includes most of Bundelkhand, that is Jhansi, Banda and Hamirpur. Bihar : Scarcity. Oudh : Scarcity in the northern part of the districts of Baraich and Gonda.

1875-76—Scarcity.

1877-78—North-Western Provinces and Oudh : Scarcity. "The area of severest distress was Agra and Muttra (Azimgarh, Gorakhpur and Basti). In Oudh severe distress was confined to Lucknow, Bara Banki and Rai Bareli districts." Speaking broadly, severe distress was confined to the Rohilkhand division, Moradabad excepted, the Agra and Muttra districts and the country lying round the tri-junction of the Lucknow, Rai Bareli and Bara Banki Districts."

1880—Allahabad, Lucknow and Benares divisions suffered badly from scarcity.

1884—Severe scarcity in the southern Punjab, comprising the Karnal, Delhi, Gurgaon, Rohtak and Hissar Districts.

1886-87—Scarcity in Bilaspur and Raipur Districts in Chhattishgarh Division of the Central Provinces.

1888-89—Scarcity in Champaran, Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga in Behar.

1890—Scarcity in the Kumaon and Garhwal districts of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh.

1890-92—Severe distress in Ajmer-Merwara.

1896-97—Severe distress in the four districts of Banda, Hamirpur, Jhansi, and Jalaun which “form the territory known as British Bundelkhand, and are situated in the Allahabad division of the North-Western Provinces.” Distress advanced to the adjacent district of Allahabad in 1895.

Behar (Bengal): Shahabad, Saran, Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Bhagalpur, Sonthal Perganas, Hazaribagh, Manbhum, Palamau. (Bengal Proper: Bankura, Nadia, Murshidabad, Khulna); Puri.

Central Provinces : Distress was officially recognised to prevail throughout the Central Provinces in the end of 1896 but in the three districts of Saugor, Damoh, and Jabalpur it evidently began in 1894 and continued with more or less severity till it culminated in the famine of 1896-97.

Punjab : The areas affected were the greater part of the Hissar district and portions of Gurgaon, Delhi, Rohtak, Karnal and Umballa districts.

1899-1900—The worst affected areas were the Central Provinces and Berar. In the Central Provinces, Betul, Raipur, Bilaspur and in Berar, the Buldana districts, witnessed the worst phases of famine. In the Punjab, Hissar, Rohtak, Gurgaon, Delhi and Karnal districts and Ajmer Marwara were severely affected.

## NON-OFFICIAL RELIEF

If official measures for famine relief can be assessed by the money spent, it is difficult to form even a rough idea of the extent and total cost of non-official help rendered voluntarily by the people of Bengal. The non-official organisations started very early and continued till the signs of distress had almost disappeared. While every bit of service rendered to or on behalf of the Government had to be purchased by money, non-official service was wholly gratuitous and money was actually spent only for the purchase and transport of food-stuffs and other necessities for the destitutes. It was a tremendous task to secure requisite quantities of foodgrains, drugs and clothings even with money. A large number of relief kitchens were started in almost every part of the country, some of which were supplied with rice (mostly weak and worm-eaten) and a small quantity of *dal* (pulses) at reduced prices by the Government. These organisations had to pay for transport of goods from Government stores, meet all costs incidental to the preparation and distribution of 'gruel' out of voluntary local subscriptions. At a very late stage, when local committees were no longer able to pay the price, foodgrains, often in insufficient quantities, were supplied free by the Government. Movements of grains through the railways were extremely difficult as the whole machinery of transport had been taken over by the Government at an earlier stage. Private lorries could not move for want of petrol and the 'Denial Policy' had rendered river transport impossible.

Monetary help came from far and near—even from foreign countries. And spontaneous expressions of sympathy from outside sustained the workers through the ordeal. Compared with the service rendered by voluntary organisations, the Governmental measures look rather very small; and it can be said without any fear of contradiction that but for non-official help, both organisational and individual, the disaster would have assumed a much larger proportion than it actually did.

With regard to official measures the following remark of the Famine Commissioners is as cogent in 1943 as it was in 1866 :

*"It is only to be regretted that so many letters, so many projects and so much zeal, should have ended in so little practical result as we shall find to have been the case and that so much should have failed owing to the want of a common understanding between the different authorities."*—Report of the Famine Commission, 1867, para 246.